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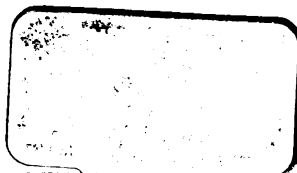
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ELINOR DRYDEN'S PROBATION.

BY

K. S. MACQUOID,

AUTHOR OF "HESTOR KIRTON," "CHESTERFORD,"
"A BAD BEGINNING," &c., &c.

"There's a Divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough hew them how we will."—HAMLET.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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CONTENTS

OF THE THIRD VOLUME.

BOOK VII.—REAPING.

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. ELINOR AGAIN AT FLAIBS	3
II. DISTRUST	22
III. DEBT	32
IV. IN WHICH MISS BROWNLOW RESOLVES TO BIT AND BRIDLE FATE	41
V. TIME'S REVENGES	58
VI. MR. FISHER PLAYS FAST AND LOOSE . .	75
VII. THE OLD QUESTION	88

BOOK VIII.—HARVEST.

I. THE PICTURE IN THE WHITE BEDCHAMBER	107
II. ELINOR AND THE SQUIRE	118
III. THE PLOTTERS	130
IV. THE SQUIRE'S PROPOSAL	139
V. ROLAND MARKHAM'S DISCOVERY . . .	150
VI. A REVELATION	163
VII. NORTHOVER ON GUARD	180

BOOK VIII.—HARVEST—*continued.*

CHAPTER	PAGE
VIII. REJECTED	194
IX. THE SEALED PACKET	225
X. FATHER AND SON	265
XI. MR. FISHER FINDS HIS WAY TO FLAIRE	273
XII. THE DAY AFTER	288
XIII. JOY	300
CHAPTER THE LAST	307
EPILOGUE	311

BOOK THE SEVENTH.

REAPING. ' 1

ELINOR DRYDEN'S PROBATION.

CHAPTER I.

ELINOR AGAIN AT FLAIRS.

THE schoolroom at Flairs had been renovated by the Squire's orders, and under Northover's active superintendence had been converted into a very charming sitting-room for the two young ladies. The life the housekeeper had led the carpenter, who, being an original genius reared on the estate, was builder, painter, paperhanger, and contriver of everything domestic ingenuity required "up at the house," would take too long to tell. Something in the man's skill partly controlled her, so that a good deal of indignation escaped in extra scoldings to the maids, and

deeply muttered asides. Still her worry was endless, and when the job was finished the carpenter told his wife he'd sooner be nibbled to death by ducks than live another week in the house with Mrs. Northover.

She was one of those women who ought to be born in couples—in no other way could she have found a human being who could do right—and then she would have found fault at being born so. Why do we all like other people to think our thoughts and walk in our paths, on far more important topics than papering a room? Is it not a want of universal love? Call it charity, or catholicity, or any other name, it words the same meaning. Is not the great secret of want of happiness in each other's society the perfect inability of some, and the reluctance of others, to see that any one can be wiser than themselves, or to admit freedom of opinion? If three people are of accord, and the fourth does not follow suit, but plays a trump card, effectually silencing open contradiction, his adversaries will suspect a revoke; it is so impossible that their play or argument could have been wrong.

Cecil's admiration of the room when finished entirely failed to satisfy the housekeeper. She "would as soon have been doused in milk and water, as listen to Miss Brownlow's 'very pretties,' and 'thank you very much, Northover, for the trouble you have had.'"

It was a real relief to this devourer of praise, when Elinor, whose ready tact made her anxious to conciliate her old foe, praised everything enthusiastically, from the carpet to the freshly-gathered nosegays of spring flowers that perfumed the room; as she declared afterwards to Cecil—

"I believe you might choke that woman with compliments before she'd have enough; she'd stand mouth open to swallow them just as a hippopotamus swallows buns."

Whether by judicious praise, or by her natural powers of pleasing, Elinor charmed the whole household, from her uncle downwards.

Mr. Dryden received her at first with more effort at affection than he really felt. He was not a large-hearted man, and Cecil had nestled into its warmest nook. Ben's death was still

too recent for him to rouse into cheerfulness ; but he watched the two girls attentively, although he seemed to leave them to themselves.

The perfect womanliness—the absence of the childlike clinging trust that had made Cecil so endearing—roused at first his old feelings of doubt and distrust towards his niece ; but day by day, as he observed her gaiety and good humour with Cecil, and saw the brightness slowly returning to the orphan girl's eyes and complexion, he warmed to Elinor, listened with pleasure to her lively stories, and took pains to show her the high place she was taking in his opinion.

She did not scold Cecil for giving way. She took apparently little notice of her weakness ; but she brought a brightness, a sunshine into the dull old house, it had not known for years. She was touched by Cecil's changed looks, and she was determined to be kind to her, and to win her love.

“There is something infectious, I think, about you, Elinor,” Cecil said ; “before you came everything was an exertion, and now,

spite of all that has happened, you make life so pleasant, that one forgets to be ill."

"Well, to tell you the truth, I consider myself your preserver." Elinor laughed with a heartiness that was truly, as Cecil had said, infectious. "I don't think the sort of thing you called life, when first I came, was worth having. I don't see what good it was to you—poor dear little thing! I believe, between the Squire and his housekeeper, you had been moped to death."

And then she bent over her, and kissed her with a warmth that stopped remonstrance, although in her heart Cecil was wroth with Elinor for such flippant mention of her uncle.

She really loved Cecil now—half from the impulsiveness that always burst into sudden and rarely enduring friendships, and half because she had a secret suspicion that she had robbed Cecil of Maurice's affection; for although he could never be anything to her it was not possible he could soon forget her. But the liking she felt for Cecil Brownlow was of a higher kind than that she had at first bestowed on Adelaide. "A woman—a spaniel, and a walnut-tree—"

Well—the end is not palatable (at least to the first—perhaps the other two may like the process,) but there is truth in it. Adelaide's ready love and entire submission had been pleasant enough at first, but, as we have seen, they rather roused Elinor's tyranny than any unselfish return of affection; in Cecil she found for the first time mental gifts equal, if not superior, to her own, and a something else that baffled her, and gave this girl who looked and seemed so much younger, a decided superiority.

Cecil was grateful for Elinor's kindness, and felt refreshed by her bright amusing talk; but she was not heedlessly impulsive, and her late sorrow had, perhaps by chastening her natural flow of spirits, made her more discerning. She was intuitively quick in reading character, and the very truth that made her a puzzle to Elinor recognised in slight but unmistakable tokens the presence of falsehood. She wronged Elinor on one point. She fancied that affection towards herself might be as feigned as some of her other qualities;—but the very difficulty she found in winning Cecil stimulated Elinor's liking

for her. She longed to tell her her secret, hoping that the avowal would win confidence; yet when she thought of her perfect openness, and her warm love for Mr. Dryden, she hesitated.

Would Cecil be generous enough to espouse her cause and keep faith? if she would, how useful she would be; for her constant companionship made it sometimes difficult to receive and to answer her lover's letters with safety, and life at Flairs was so still and uniform that without those love-letters, Elinor felt she should stagnate.

Mr. Dryden had decreed that six months, at least, should be accorded to Cecil's mourning, and Elinor yielded with a readiness at which she would have been incredulous a few weeks before. Though she said impatiently that her anticipated pleasure seemed to be a mirage—only real in distance, she had yet to learn that "'tis expectation makes a blessing dear," that bonâ-fide enjoyment exists far more in anticipation, or in those pleasures that start up like a covey of birds where we least look for them.

But a greater compensation than Cecil's society for this enforced quietude, was found in Mr. Fisher's letters. It is all very well of women to fancy that only true men can write the passionate sentences, the caressing phrases that move so deeply. James Fisher wrote with just as much fervour as if he had not served a dozen years apprenticeship to love-making, and there is no use in saying that "love-letters" are not very "nice things,"—the best and most refined mental confectionary. It might be trying to one's patience and one's gravity to read other people's; but then as nothing about others is as interesting as what relates to ourselves and those we love, this would not be wonderful; our own love-letters must always be interesting.

The difficulty of receiving her cousin's letters made them even more delightful to Elinor—she was far too clever to attempt a clandestine correspondence under her uncle's roof. Mr. Fisher's letters were addressed, Post Office, Starby, and Elinor could not go to seek them frequently without exciting suspicion, and often she had to

live on, day after day, feeling sure that a treasure was waiting for her if she could but secure it. Unless she determined to tell Cecil the whole truth, she must not know anything. She did not guess how much she already suspected. Elinor could not always walk out alone, and although she occasionally sent her French maid to Starby for James's letters, she would not trust her own to any hands but those of the postman, whom it was easy enough to meet in the park out of sight of the house.

At first she had deposited them in the letter-bag, believing they would escape notice ; but Northover's manner had suddenly and strangely changed towards her, and Elinor had shrewd suspicions that she made a practice of reviewing the addresses on the letters, although she did not suppose she would venture to do more. Still it had happened more than once that she had been obliged to give her letter to the postman in Cecil's presence, and although no explanation had been asked, Elinor understood such perfect silence to be condemnatory, and she could not frame a justification—the something

in those clear, pure eyes stopped the words before they came.

She was very restless, to-day—she had felt sure with that strange intuition that heralds coming events, that a letter of more than usual importance was waiting for her, and yet she could contrive no excuse for a visit to Starby, or rather to the post-house, that, at the beginning of the fever, Mr. Dryden had had built between the village and Flairs to avoid any risk of infection—a tiny, white-washed shed, inhabited by an old, deaf, cross woman, and her cat. If Elinor had not learned that Mrs. Jump was the new post-mistress she would scarcely have been so venturesome, but Mrs. Jump was as taciturn as she was unpopular, and unless Elinor roused Northover's suspicions there was no one at Flairs quick-witted enough to find out her correspondence.

Miss Dryden had always a very courteous ready greeting for the country people in her walks, and it suited well with this urbanity that she should loiter for a few minutes once a week, or so, to enliven Mrs. Jump's solitude.

She found Cecil so resolutely bent on sketching the bridge in the park that she must go alone, and to Elinor there was in this much more to excite her uncle's suspicion than when accompanied by Cecil. The suppressed excitement had unnerved her—she had been longing for four days for this letter, feeling sure that it lay waiting for her at Mrs. Jump's, but her uncle had pertinaciously accompanied them in their walks and rides, and there was an increasing vigilance in Northover's eyes, which made her unwilling to attract attention by going out alone at an unusual hour. She could delay no longer now; the excitement was making her pre-occupied and silent—it seemed to her a miracle that Cecil had not remarked upon this openly.

She left her settled at her sketching, and then strolled leisurely away by the river side, as if she had no further object in view than to watch the silver grey fish sparkling suddenly into sight from the pebbles of the clear, bright water.

“Running on and on for ever,” thought Elinor, “between these unchanging banks, how

much longer must my life flow on fettered and barriered, before I can acknowledge James as my promised husband in the face of the world?"

It was mere romance, and she knew it—she knew that even for the immediate possession of Flairs itself, she would not give up the prestige which would attend her introduction to the county as Mr. Dryden's heiress. Every woman, so Elinor told herself, has a right to a fair share of love and admiration, and if she were to appear among them as a promised wife, she should be robbed of half her attractions in the eyes of those long-dreamed-of victims to her beauty and her wit. Elinor had not mixed enough in society as yet to be quite cured of her romance, or rather the polish of conventionalities had not yet become sufficiently firm and enduring to keep it below her ordinary stratum of thought; for romance will often hide away in many a worldly, hackneyed, woman's heart, or what she has left of such an encumbrance, to start into sudden life when least expected. But with her it was not yet so hidden away—perhaps being entirely that of the fancy, less akin to

feeling than that of the imagination, it was more buoyant and less easily thrust out of sight.

Some minds may find it difficult to realise that Elinor could love James Fisher at all, and yet long for the admiration of a crowd of strangers ; but she did love him far more truly now than when she had parted from him—his letters had doubtless helped this, and as each act of an intention strengthens the resolution and makes attainment easier, so the very effort at reply to his assurances of love stimulated the growth of her own.

The utter seclusion in which she lived helped also, and coming Spring with its bursting buds and blossoms, and that unutterable yearning and swelling of the heart that always accompanies the languid weariness of the first Spring-time, nourished the germ, which a few weeks of excitement and rapid change of scene would possibly have stifled.

She walked along the road now with her firm, free tread, marvelling at the change a few days had brought in the trees and hedges, and listen-

ing to the busy household talk of the birds, as they chirped their midday gossip incessantly from bough to bough.

Her heart beat quickly when she came in sight of Mrs. Jump's cottage. In two minutes more she should have the letter.

Mrs. Jump was deafer, and slower, and crosser than usual, and as Elinor stood just outside the door of the one-storied cottage, pinching off, in her impatience, the dry tendrils of the American creeper, which seemed scarcely to have recovered its planting, she heard a sound that made her heart beat in a different and most uncomfortable manner.

It was a distant horse-tread—it might be a stranger, or one of the servants, but it might also be her uncle.

She stepped forward eagerly, and looked along the road—there was no one in sight. Elinor had not known till then how much she dreaded discovery; she had told herself that she did not believe in the conditions attached to her inheritance, that now her uncle had again received her at Flairs he could not escape making her his

heiress without an open scandal, which he, of all men, would shrink from creating. She had only to be careful for three years, and meantime she must contrive that James should make her uncle's acquaintance, fascinate him, and seem to fall in love with her in the most natural way in the world ; till now this had been to Elinor probable and practicable—now the whole fabric seemed to crumble under each nearer and nearer approaching hoof-tread.

She turned quickly towards the open door of the cottage.

“Come, Mrs. Jump, you are very long this morning !”

The old woman's deafness did not prevent her from hearing the sharpness impatience gave to Elinor's voice ; she gave her the letter with a dissatisfied grunt, and then coming out of her cottage stood looking after her, putting her blue-checked apron up to her head to shield off the wind.

A loud—“Halloa, Mrs. Jump, how are you to-day ?” made her start and pity herself for half an hour after ; and she thought the Squire “right

down unfeelin' for coming so sudden upon a struggling widder, who couldn't help being hard o' hearin'."

The Squire rode on, but the road turned just beyond the Post Office, and Elinor had made such good speed, that she was not in sight when her uncle frightened Mrs. Jump out of his way. He was in a calm, happy mood. He had ridden over to Starby, to see the head-stone he had ordered for Mr. Brownlow's grave. It was a surprise he had planned for Cecil, after ascertaining her wishes on the subject. She had seemed so much better and brighter the last few weeks, that he thought she could bear the renewal of grief, which a visit to her father's grave must cause.

He had been talking, too, to the new incumbent, and had been pleased to learn that things were falling into their usual course in the village.

He turned the bend of the road, and saw Elinor before him. To his surprise, she did not look round, and yet it would have seemed natural that she should have recognised his approach. He was soon beside her, and rein-

ing in the horse, whose impatience at nearing home resented the quiet pace by sundry upward jerks of his head, he asked Elinor where she had been.

He meant nothing by the question—it was a mere matter-of-fact phrase ; but she had made up her mind he would suspect, or that Mrs. Jump had chattered. She tried to look unconcerned and truthful, as she answered,—

“ Only to see Mrs. Jump.”

As she said the words, their direct falsehood brought the blood tingling to her cheeks, till even her eyes felt suffused with the hot glow.

She dropped her fixed gaze ; she knew she could not sustain it. An instant more, and she would have seen the old gleam of distrust—so long a stranger to her uncle—fixed on her, as if it would read the true meaning of her confusion ; but she neither looked up, nor risked a perilous silence. She talked gaily as she walked along beside him, of Cecil, and her vague attempts at sketching ; wondering how much paper she would spoil before they joined her : and, spite of his

pre-occupation, Mr. Dryden found himself obliged to answer in the same strain.

But it was not in his nature to dismiss an idea easily, and his manner told Elinor that she was suspected. Still she went on with her talk more merrily than ever. She mimicked a gipsy, who had begged of her and Cecil a few days before, till the Squire told her that if her scarlet cloak were ragged, and her hat a little more sunburnt, she might pass for a genuine vagrant.

"Well, uncle"—she looked up at him saucily—"it is what I really am—a born Bohemian!"

"Not in principle, Elinor."

He spoke so gravely, that she started. But the conversation must not grow dangerous.

"Have you not trained me yourself? All the good in me I owe you, uncle. I can't say what I might have grown up but for you!"

Her eyes glistened with the gratitude she really felt just then, and the Squire was so touched by her plainly genuine emotion, that he did not stop to consider the full meaning of her words; and if he had done so, it is possible he would have thought alienation from such a

man as Roland Markham only natural in a girl trained by Wentworth Dryden.

He did not reply at once ; his next words referred to her previous talk about Cecil, as if to make up for the want of interest he had shown before.

Elinor went on, thankful he had changed the subject ; but the danger had been too near even for her courage. She grew almost sick with the effort of keeping off unsafe topics.

There were the Park gates at last. She had come out by a little side door, from which a path across fields led to the high road ; but she made no allusion to this now. As soon as they were through, she turned to her uncle, and saying she should take the short way to the river side, she left him abruptly.

CHAPTER II.

DISTRUST.

It is the key-stone that makes the arch secure, and Elinor, by the want of that last ten minutes' patience, had left out her key-stone. The fair arch which had been gradually spanning Mr. Dryden's doubts gave way, and revealed them beneath its ruins.

And then a sentence of Northover's, spoken that very morning, came back.

He was placing his letters in the bag, which hung at the top of the staircase leading downwards from his justice-room, just as the house-keeper came up from her sanctum.

"I believe, sir, the bag would have an empty time of it if it wasn't for you. The young ladies don't trouble it much—certainly not Miss Elinor."

The emphasis on the name had annoyed him; it seemed to beg the question which in former times he would have longed to ask; in those times before Sir Stuart's death, when he doubted almost every one—even Northover herself. Perhaps the foundation of his firm regard for Ben Karse had been, that he had never been able to doubt him; that he had been the only bit of safe ground on which confidence could anchor in all those miserable years of suspicion.

And yet the old leaven had not been all purged. More than once as he rode to Starby that morning, a vague guess at Northover's meaning had hazarded itself; but his visit to his old friend's grave, and the thought of Cecil and her sorrow, had banished disquiet from his ride home.

Elinor's confusion had kindled fresh suspicion, but had not revived that which had gone before; but now her abrupt departure

seemed to bring the parted links of distrust into view, and to rivet them with the force of a sledge hammer.

Northover had insinuated—so he understood her observation—that Elinor wrote other letters than those she placed in the bag, and he himself had seen her confusion when surprised near the post-office.

What was he to do? If he questioned Mrs. Jump he should destroy Elinor's character in her eyes, and possibly in those of others to whom she might relate the incident. With whom could Elinor maintain a clandestine correspondence? He had never forbidden her to receive letters even from her father; besides, she constantly received them from her own family, and tossed them over to Cecil before his face, without any reserve as to the writer. She was so entirely frank, that he found it hard to persist in his doubts. Northover might have meant nothing, and Elinor's confusion might have been caused by surprise.

But though he said this firmly to himself, he found as determined an answer; the doubts

had gained comfortable lodgings, and had no mind to be put to the rout so speedily.

Still his work at Starby during the pestilence had left blessed tokens. He strove with all his strength for mastery over his suspicion. He reminded himself of the blight that had cankered his life's best blossoms ; of the shadow that had darkened his hearth-stone, because he had not so striven in earlier life ; and then when he found all fruitless, and that, try as he would, Elinor could no longer hold the same spotless place in his regard, he determined that she should not be condemned unheard, that he would at least convince himself that she was guilty or not guilty before he harboured suspicion against her.

He rode round to the stable-yard, and leaving his horse there, took the road which, as has been said, led through the shrubberies to the bridge.

He walked along thinking deeply and sadly. Although he could not trust her fully till he had done so, he yet shrank from questioning Elinor. He knew so much less of her than he did of

Cecil, and it would be very painful to build up again, by any mistaken conjecture, the reserve that seemed fairly broken down between them.

He told himself all this on his way to the bridge, and as he contrasted the two girls, he asked himself suddenly how it was that he knew better how to deal with Cecil than with Elinor, the one almost his own child, sprung from his own race, and the other a stranger. He had often felt the estrangement between himself and his adopted child, but he had never dwelt on it as any but a necessary evil, nor, possibly because he had not till now seen them constantly together, had he ever thought of asking himself whether the same love, the same tenderness he had given to Cecil during the last few years, might not if bestowed earlier on Elinor have produced a better understanding between them. The Squire was not a man likely to fling his own faults on the shoulders of others, but in the midst of his self-blame, the remembrance of Elinor's childhood,—wilful, haughty, untruthful, with apparently no one soft place in her nature for love to work on,—came back ; and he

thought that if Cecil had been as hard and as unsympathising, he should have known no more of her than he did of Elinor. A deeper motive than any as to its effect, and yet a more trivial as to its nature, lay hidden from the Squire's self-communing. His fastidious refinement had been soothed by the soft gentleness of the one girl as much as it had been repelled by the boisterous ways and untidy habits of the other. Almost unconsciously he recognised her father, or rather what he imagined Roland Markham to be, in every unfeminine movement, in every rude word, and he had tried to see as little of the child as possible on her first arrival at Flairs, in the hope that different training would work a change.

He reached the bridge before he had quite determined how to act. There was no one to be seen; only once, as his eyes scanned the hanging wood on the other side, now partly clothed with the vivid leafage of early spring, he thought he saw a glimpse of scarlet moving among the trees.

It might be Elinor, but then it might be

one of the gipsies who had managed to effect an entrance a few days before, and had stolen in again to collect fuel.

He turned towards the house, and walked with his long, rapid steps across the lawn, passing under the beech-tree as he had passed under it on that August afternoon when he had first learned certainly that Elinor could deceive him.

Perhaps it was the recurrence of the old distrusting habit of mind that brought Elinor's first deceit back strangely now ; and as his mind dwelt on the whole scene, he remembered, too, how Maurice's fearless truth had first changed his feelings towards the boy he had since so carefully watched over.

"Yes," he muttered to himself, bending his lofty head to pass through the little door which had once formed Elinor's secret egress to her interviews with Maurice, and which now stood invitingly open as if to remind the Squire of its existence. "Those two, Cecil and he, seem made for each other ; and yet they must not meet again. It is hard, but feeling must not stand in the way of justice. However, people

say that 'opposite natures match best,' so all may go well in the way I wish. His truth may help Elinor's."

And then the deep, heart-wrung sadness which gave such an inexplicable expression to his face clouded over it, as he thought how little in his own married life he had realised the truth of the saying he had just quoted.

He went slowly and heavily up the winding stairs, and pushing open the door, he passed into the North Gallery. Perhaps in his pre-occupied mood he had forgotten where the stairs would lead him, for he shrunk back unwillingly when he entered the gallery.

But as he approached the door of the White Bed-room a sudden change came over him.

He pressed one hand hard against his forehead, as if recalling or concentrating thought, and stood quite still for a few minutes. When he removed his hand there was still deep sorrow, but the bitter look of anguish had cleared away from his face.

He looked at the door, and seemed tempted to turn to handle and go in; but checking

the impulse, he walked to the end of the gallery, lifted the red curtain which screened its eastern end, and turned towards what Elinor now called her morning room.

Only Cecil was there, smiling over her failures. 'She had been in full half-an-hour, she said, but she had not seen or heard anything of Elinor.

"She probably missed you at the bridge, and came in by a different way."

"I think not, for I just now went to her bed-room, and Françoise told me she was still out walking."

Mr. Dryden felt vexed at the sudden contradiction these few words gave to his new-formed resolves. At the door of the White Bed-chamber he had renewed a vow—first uttered there—never again to allow himself to doubt a fellow creature until convincing and undeniable proof of guilt should have been produced; and yet, try as he would, the glimpse of red he had caught through the trees would recur importunately.

A few minutes of Cecil's bright sunshiny

talk helped him as much as his previous resolution. When he went up to his writing room, he decided that probably it was Elinor whom he had seen among the trees—and if it were? she had only said she should take the short path to the bridge. Cecil's name had not been mentioned by her; it was his own surmise that had coupled her abrupt departure with an anxiety to seek her friend.

CHAPTER III.

DEBT.

It was Elinor's red cloak that her uncle had seen through the trees. She had gone almost mechanically to the bridge, and not finding Cecil there, had passed over it and climbed into the wood on the other side, to seek a solitude wherein she could read her letter in peace. It was just the spot for the perusal of a love-letter; overhead were bright budding leaves, primroses and early blue-bells peeped through the undergrowth, and formed a fresh contrast to the brown remnants of last year's leafage; and below her—as she threw herself down at the

foot of a beech tree—sparkled the rapid river, eddying in foam flakes round the grey obstructing stones that lay scattered at random in its bed. Yet spite of her pleasant surroundings, Elinor's letter seemed to disquiet her more than her uncle's suspicions. She read it over twice, and then laid it down in her lap, while she examined its enclosure.

"It is all over with me now," she murmured, hiding her face between her hands. "If Uncle Dryden once knows of my debts, he will never forgive me, or make me his heiress."

She had hoped to pay off by degrees the money she owed, strictly economising the Squire's liberal allowance, but Mr. Fisher's envelope not only enclosed a threatening letter from her principal creditor—who knew too much of Roland Markham to trust his daughter—but also contained the intelligence that the person who brought the letter had learned Miss Dryden's return to Flairs.

"And the next will be addressed to me here, or perhaps to my uncle."

She gave a long shuddering sigh. Closely as

intrigue had interwoven itself in her nature, she had been very happy in the pure, calm life she had been leading lately, when,—but for her correspondence with James, there had been nothing to conceal either from Cecil, or from the Squire,—the better part of her nature had had time for growth. And yet so vitiated had her mind become by the poison of her early reading and lax teachers, that she believed the present state to be exceptional and unreal, and concealment and clandestine ways—so long as they did not produce deliberate falsehood—excusable and natural.

Before she opened her letter, she had thought of confiding in Cecil, and asking her to allow James to write under cover to her, but her only motive in doing this, was to prevent the reception of letters of which she could give no account. She would not have any more addressed to Mrs. Jump. She trembled again as she pictured to herself her uncle's grief at what she knew he would consider dishonourable. She did not think of his anger so much as of his grief, she had been very sensible of the change

that had taken place in the Squire, and loved him more than she would have thought possible, but still she feared him, and Elinor's was a nature that liked to be paramount. Her love for her father was founded on his admiration and approval of all she said and did, and with the subtle sophistry we are so little aware of—but by which our self-love governs—she could not help esteeming the opinions of one, who, besides being her father, never contradicted her.

Roland Markham's creed was that all the world was more or less in debt, the only free people being vagrants, and those who paid from hand to mouth. Elinor had listened to this doctrine so frequently inculcated on her mother, and at first had wondered strangely at—the discrepancy between it and her uncle's parting advice, "never to owe any one a penny." Now as she sat thinking under the beech-tree, it struck her that, as the Squire was very unlike any one else she knew, possibly his ideas might be so too; her father was a Londoner, and Londoners must know more of the general tone and habits of people than those who lived shut up year

after year in a lonely country house, having little intercourse with their fellow men.

What would James think about it? A warm glow sprang to her cheeks; if he knew that she had any secret anxiety he would insist on relieving it, on paying off these troublesome claimants, and she could not stoop to accept money from any one out of her family, even from the man she loved. But she could, and would, abide by his opinion. He knew so much of the world and its ways; if she could but see him and pour out her trouble, what comfort and relief it would bring. He spoke of having received the enclosed letter from Roland Markham casually, just because he was writing to her. Her mother was still absent.

For a few moments a wild idea of travelling to London and back, unknown to any one, possessed her; but unless her uncle should leave home, this would be impracticable; and even if he did, she could not lull Northover's vigilance.

"One thing I am resolved on," she said in the midst of her perplexity; "as soon as my uncle has acknowledged me as his heiress, I will

get him to discharge that woman. I live in positive terror of her sharp, suspicious eyes."

The result of her meditation was that, although she could not go to London, there was nothing to prevent James from coming to Flairs, except the risk of detection; and risk, Elinor thought, ought only to enhance to true lovers the pleasure of meeting. Why should they not meet in the wood? He might enter the park from the gates beyond Karse's cottage, opposite Sir Stuart Palmer's avenue. If Cecil persisted in this new fancy for sketching—and Elinor had lived long enough with her to remark that whatever Cecil began she persevered in—she should be free to walk where and when she pleased. She could describe the path through the wood so exactly, that James could not miss it; and as there was a right of way across the park from those gates to the river below the waterfall, he might turn aside into the wood, without meeting any one belonging to the house.

The planning this scheme had gilded the leaden perplexity of the afternoon's troubles; yes,

it was all right, and there was no use in worrying: and she sprang up from her seat under the tree, as blithe again as any of the chirpers that filled the wood with their soft twitterings.

If James told her debt was disgraceful, she meant to believe him, and take his advice as to the readiest means of raising the money necessary to liquidate it. In her varied reading she had picked up the notion that a prospective heiress might find this easy; but if Mr. Fisher confirmed her father's dictum, then she should quietly resign herself to consequences; and if her creditor wrote to Mr. Dryden, she should represent to him the impossibility of living on so small an income as that he had hitherto thought sufficient for her.

So, shaking off her anxiety, as a Newfoundland shakes off water, she sprang gaily down the sloping path, in almost the wild, untamed mood of former days, when she knew no cares except those of preparing lessons, and Northover's grave remonstrances about the rents in her gowns.

Why is it that to some people, equal it may be in goodness, Debt wears such different as-

pects? To one it is a burden, heavy at times, perhaps, but still not so much so that it cannot be shifted from shoulder to shoulder, as it makes its pressure felt—sometimes set aside altogether for a while as a thing of no consequence; while to others Debt is a canker, a hidden secret, alike disgraceful and intolerable, taking brightness out of days and sleep out of nights, till at last it saps life as well as cheerfulness, and brings peace in an early grave.

Debt is the hardest to bear of all evils, because often the most self-inflicted. No one could have thought its curse rested on Elinor as she almost danced into the morning room, and upbraided Cecil for her cowardly desertion of her post—leaving her, as she told her uncle afterwards at dinner—to the mercy of the gipsies, who still haunted the woods.

And she rattled on in such a lively strain, and in the anticipated happiness of seeing her lover was in such a tender, caressing mood towards Cecil, that Mr. Dryden's disquiet was completely soothed—so much light-heartedness, he argued, could not cover deceit.

When he went to bed that night, he kissed Elinor with unusual warmth, and offered up mental thanks for undeserved happiness. Hitherto he had regarded his disappointment in his adopted child as a merited punishment.

And Elinor went to bed happy too—so happy that, spite of all her resolutions, she confided the secret of her engagement to Cecil, in the vague, mysterious way in which some girls choose to talk of one of the greatest realities of life. She did not even tell her lover's name, and though her friend's subdued silence struck her as unsympathising, she never suspected that Cecil guessed she was speaking of Maurice Karse.

CHAPTER IV.

IN WHICH MISS BROWNLOW RESOLVES TO BIT AND BRIDLE FATE.

It was an immense relief that the morning's post brought no letters for Elinor ; but her uncle's troubled look, as he opened one of his, brought back the fear of the previous day.

Only momentarily, for after re-reading it, he turned to Cecil.

"Your aunt, Miss Brownlow, is alone, Cecil —your uncle has gone out of town for a holiday ; and she asks me to spare you for a few weeks. What answer am I to send her ?"

If the invitation had come on the previous

day, Cecil would most likely have refused it. But Elinor's confession had made further companionship with her for the present distasteful. It was not only a certain, almost unconscious soreness of feeling about Maurice, but also the strong disapprobation she felt at anything which must be concealed from Mr. Dryden. Elinor had said, in answer to her inquiry, that her father approved of her choice ; but Cecil had heard quite enough of the story of Elinor's parents to think that the Squire's guidance must be much safer than theirs ; and besides, how could she hide anything from her uncle, whom Cecil now almost idolized ? She could not so mistrust him ; and as her warm young heart swelled with indignation, she felt that it would be impossible to return Elinor's friendship, as she had hitherto striven to do.

This temporary absence would be a real boon.

She felt so eager to avail herself of her aunt's offer, that she had to put a curb on her manner, in the fear that Mr. Dryden might think her ungrateful. She said her aunt had been very kind to her, that she had disappointed her be-

fore, and that she was glad to go to her now that she could really be of use ; and then, seeing Mr. Dryden's grave face, she said in her sweet, earnest voice,—

“ But you will promise to miss me very much, won't you ? ”

“ We need not promise, Cecil ; we shall miss you far more than I fear you will miss Flairs.”

And before she could answer, he rose up from table and left the room.

He was bitterly disappointed—slow and special in his likings he was sternly and jealously exacting in the return he demanded.

Miss Brownlow's letter had annoyed him. She told him that her brother and young Mr. Karse were going on a walking tour for a few weeks, and added almost with sarcasm that she supposed Mr. Dryden would not object to trust her with the guardianship of her niece during their absence. It was a pugnacious letter—the writing of a woman conscious that she was not liked, and determined not to be the first to conciliate. Besides, Jane Ann was such a thorough and uncompromising democrat that it annoyed

her to be brought into communication at all with a man who asserted his position as Mr. Dryden did. She considered birth a mere accident, and spite of the Squire's courteous deference towards her, she always insisted that he was condescending and had no right to such a stately bearing. She was consistent in this theory; her mind was too masculine in its attributes to take the one-sided view ordinary women do of such questions. Her niece, Cecil, was quite good enough to marry a nobleman; but then Miss Brownlow would have considered her equally well mated with a farmer, always supposing him a scholar and unpretending.

The only class against whom she entertained a caste prejudice was the rich *parvenu* order; not because they had made their money in trade, that of itself would have commanded her respect—hard work and achievement of any kind she revered; but because, as she said, they “aped their betters, assumed affected drawling manners, in which many a first-class lady’s-maid beat them hollow, and were the slaves of the pampered servants who mocked at and detected their as-

sumption." Into such a class Cecil should not marry, otherwise her choice should not be controlled by her. This was Miss Brownlow's determination when she sent for her niece.

It was difficult to think her the same woman who had written that hard letter, when she met Cecil at the railway-station. She was so full of emotion at sight of the fair, delicate girl in her deep mourning, that some minutes passed before she was aware that a tall, stiff, sharp-eyed woman stood beside her niece, quietly taking in the whole scene, and seriously scandalised by the middle-aged lady's want of self-control; "kissing and hugging before men, above all before railway-porters," being, Northover afterwards asserted, "most perplexing and annoying to a correct-minded female to witness." It is possible that the manner in which she was allowed to stand unnoticed, for at least five minutes, exaggerated the view she took of Miss Brownlow's behaviour; for when Cecil recollecting her turned round and presented her as Northover, the housekeeper at Flairs, and her aunt asked her cordially to come and rest and refresh herself

at their house, Northover with a stately courtesy, of which some of the hooped and powdered dames in the North Gallery might have been proud, loftily declined the honour.

She was going on to friends of her own, who would grudge losing a moment of her company. She had the honour to wish Miss Brownlow and her aunt good-morning.

"What a frightful old frump!" Miss Brownlow scarcely waited till the housekeeper was out of hearing. "She's just as priggish as—I beg your pardon, child, I was going to talk treason. I suppose you worship Squire Dryden as much as ever—eh? Here's the cab—now jump in. Good gracious me! man, put that box on more securely; it will be spinning off into the middle of the road and killing some one. Don't you hear?—that box—" and with one foot on the step she gesticulated vehemently, only getting the invariable "All right!" in reply, till her cab was ordered to move on, and she was reluctantly obliged to seat herself "without having half seen after the luggage."

But in about two minutes her head and half

of her body were through the window aperture, to inform the driver that he was going at least a quarter of a mile out of his way—but in vain ; the cabman quite understood the sort of “ fare ” he was driving ; he half turned his head with another “ all right,” emphasized by a wink, and went steadily on.

“ You know, aunt, it is never any use ; they will go their own way,” pleaded Cecil, who could not help smiling at the notion of taking so much trouble about a quarter of a mile.

And Miss Brownlow smoothed herself down with the mental reservation that if she had been alone, and had not wanted to talk to Cecil, she would have made that cabman “ mind ” her.

She had much to hear from her niece. The sad story of those last few days, which the poor girl had been totally unable to write any details of, must be told now to satisfy the affectionate sister ; and though it re-opened to their fountain head the channels of Cecil's agonised sorrow, still there was solace in weeping for her father, with one who had loved him so dearly.

“ Nothing but your Uncle Erasmus's express

desire," Miss Brownlow said, as they sat together after tea in her "den,"—"could have kept me away from helping you, my own dear child, and being of what use I could to my poor dear John, but Erasmus was frightened, thoroughly and absolutely frightened, in fact." She drew one of the front corners of her head covering through her fingers—a habit of hers when about to say something indiscreet. "I got so angry with him—that I told him I believed he was nothing but a mistake, and that I ought to have been a man and he a woman. You should have seen Erasmus, my dear,—he looked so grieved at me and so surprised, that I was knocked over at once, and didn't dare to say any more when he told me that if I went to Starby it would be in direct disobedience to his wishes. That's what comes of being calm, Cecil; if ships can't move under it, of course women can't—they have not the ghost of a chance. If I had married, my dear, I never would have chosen a calm man—I should have had to sit with my hands in my lap, saying 'yes,' for ever."

"But, aunt,"—Cecil could not help smiling through her tears at this sudden digression,—

"you always think Uncle Erasmus right, and would not have him changed on any account."

"Changed!—good gracious me!—Erasmus changed? No, child, when will you ever learn that two men like Erasmus are not found in one world?—it wouldn't hold 'em. I was talking of the ordinary sort of men that husbands are made of, and as I suppose you will be taking such an encumbrance to yourself one of these days," — here she looked at her niece sharply from under her eyebrows,—“I warn you in time to beware of a calm man; given a little temper, and if you know where to find it—when a man gets tyrannical, and they all do more or less, my dear, make up your mind to that—you may soon stir it sufficiently to make your husband say or do something foolish, then he's your equal for the time being, and you've a chance; because, Cecil, mind you, there never was a man so foolish as a woman yet; though when he is foolish, a woman who has any wits knows her advantage and doesn't lose it; but you can't do this with a calm man—he never makes an ass of himself, and his wife never gets the chance of

pulling his ears, figuratively of course ; and worse than that, she never can come out wise by contrast. After all said and done, I'm inclined to think in five cases out of six we spinsters have the best of it."

She stopped for want of breath. It is impossible to give an adequate notion of Miss Brownlow's rapidity of speech. It was not the flow of unmeaning gabble—the mere repetition of words and ideas. All she said was to the purpose, and enunciated in clear metallic tones, that rang through ordinary brains, threatening them with indigestion by the superfluity of the matter she presented to their comprehension, and bewildering even those which could keep pace with hers. She did generally in one day as much as most women do in two ; but she certainly accomplished three times her share of talk.

She was very much struck by the change in Cecil's spirits. This meeting had brought back her depression.

"You have grown rusted down there, my dear. Bright things always rust quickest, you

know ; witness my steel fender. I always call dulness ' mental damp ;' and I believe that old Flairs, with its stiff, pompous ways, was the very worst place you could possibly go to. If I had only been allowed to have my own way"—this last sentence was a sort of aside jerked out as she threw her head vehemently back, and threw her eyes up to the ceiling.

" You cannot very well be dull where Elinor is, aunt."

And though Cecil said this, she felt a certain great relief in the separation from Miss Dryden at the time.

It was only Elinor's manner that had charmed her. Even when her self-elected friend had been most demonstrative in her caressing affection, Cecil had been able to give little more than gratitude in return ; she had felt nothing spontaneous. But there was no effort required to show affection to Aunt Jane ; Cecil loved her so very much, though they differed on almost every topic, and though Miss Brownlow did entertain such incorrect notions about Flairs and its Squire.

Her aunt watched the brightness returning to Cecil's looks and words with a maternal tenderness that no one who knew her sharp, abrupt ways and hard, satirical speeches, would have thought her capable of. She descanted on the advantages a dry, airy London house possessed over a rambling, dreary old barn of a place smelling of people's ancestors.

"As if there ever was anything so foolish in this world as a rout about ancestry—wrong, too. Why, there's the Bible against it. I should like to know what Lot's wife was transformed for, if it were not for looking back, when she ought to have looked forward."

Her own infectious, hearty nature was as bracing as a sea-breeze when joined to the warm love that seemed to intensify daily towards the orphan girl. Ignoring Mr. Dryden's claims completely, she felt that Cecil had no one left but herself and Erasmus, for, as she said, "Sister Mary was no more good than a Judy doll—a well-meaning woman, but wooden-headed."

This sister Mary was also unmarried, but she

had always been an invalid, and had been brought up from childhood by an aunt, who at her death had left her a snug little property, which Mary Brownlow now enjoyed in solitude. She liked her brother Erasmus, though she thought him sadly abrupt, but she dreaded the sight of her sister. Half an hour of Jane Ann's talk was sure to give her a week of nervous head-ache.

If Flairs was dull, Miss Brownlow decided that Kintry was much worse ; but it would be happier for the child to marry and have a home of her own. The sigh that came with this thought had a double regret in it, for the loss of Cecil and also of lingering sorrow for the unrealised dreams of her own girlhood. But Cecil should not be shut up as she had been. Miss Brownlow always considered that if she had had a fair chance she might have married, and had a home of her own ; and however much she might at times choose to rail against husbands and wives, in her serious moods she always spoke of the Holy Estate as the happiest also. But then she had Erasmus ; if Cecil did

not marry, she would be left alone in future years without kith or kin, and "grow as sour as a crab for want of something to love," she added, mentally.

Why in the name of fortune if Cecil and that young Maurice Karse had a fancy for each other shouldn't they marry? Because that old frump at Flairs objected, was that any valid reason against such a marriage?

What was he to Cecil? He had a niece of his own, and if he didn't like her as well, more shame for him: people ought always to prefer their own flesh and blood to strangers. She supposed he wanted to marry Cecil to one of his grand friends, or—and as this new idea crossed her mind, Miss Brownlow, who was lying in bed arranging Cecil's future, started up and began to dress herself. It was only six o'clock, but she could not remain quiet with such a thorn in her imagination. She believed that—no, she wouldn't call him a name, there was not one bad enough—but she saw now through his reluctance to part with Cecil—he meant to marry her himself.

And her rapidly creative fancy—she had that feminine characteristic—painted in warm tints the wrong the abominable old man would do his niece Elinor by marrying a young woman ; besides, the moping misery to which he would consign her darling, beautiful Cecil, by making her his wife.

“ And if she goes back to Flairs again, and he asks her, as I know he will, she will say yes, out of gratitude, and because she is too much of a child yet to know how she will love some day, and then there'll be the old story, a jealous husband and a broken heart, for she never could love that old scarecrow ”—Miss Brownlow's anger and prejudice made her excessively unjust to the Squire's personal characteristics.—“ And then she will meet some one whom she could have liked—no, as sure as my name is Jane Ann Brownlow, she does not return to Flairs till she is married, or, as good, to some one safe and sound, and why not to Maurice ? ”

It will be seen that ideas speedily developed into resolutions of action with Miss Brownlow ; to use her own phrase, “ She never gave two

swallows at anything," when once she had determined to accomplish it. Before Cecil came to London her choice was not to be controlled, but now it seemed in every way better that it should settle on Maurice. What did it matter about their having nothing to live on? She and Erasmus never spent half their own income; why should not the young folks have the overplus till Maurice could earn money for himself? None of the Brownlows had ever been long-lived, and Mary's eight hundred a-year must come to Cecil, and then there would be her own and Erasmus's leavings. In fact, it would be quite a satisfactory match, setting aside the fact that the two children were made for each other.

Her first impulse was to write to the Squire, and tell him that she feared she could not allow Cecil to return to Flairs; she would be quite open and straight-forward just to shame his double-dealing: but almost as quickly came the certainty that the next post would bring Maurice's recall, or, at any rate, his removal from Erasmus's care. It was puzzling to know how

to decide. If Maurice and Cecil really should love each other, it would then be her duty to communicate the fact to the Squire, and a grim smile curved her handsome mouth, and she settled her head-dress with extra precision, as she thought how very pleasant a duty she should find such a communication; till then it might be best to remain passive; the Squire had made no stipulation about Cecil's return, and neither had Erasmus stated the exact day when he and his pupil might be expected. She should let things take their chance.

Her downright nature writhed at first at what seemed like taking an advantage of the Squire; but after all, he must have seen from the tone of her letter that she thought his precautions very fussy and unnecessary, and Cecil was the only niece she had in the world, and she certainly was not going to turn her out of the house till the Squire sent for her. Yes! that would be the best way to leave it—Cecil should stay till Mr. Dryden sent for her; in the meantime Fate—that is to say, Fate bitted and bridled by Miss Brownlow—might accomplish much.

CHAPTER V.

TIME'S REVENGES.

BUT before the time at which the Squire had expected Cecil's return, events had happened at Flairs which he would have been unwilling to bring a witness to ; events which so absorbed and distracted his mind, that the existence of Cecil Brownlow seemed almost blotted from its memory.

He and Elinor had found a great blank without her. Cecil had always been ready to contribute her share to the conversation, to laugh at Elinor's jokes and stories ; they fell flat now under her uncle's faint smiles, and Elinor was

not at all inclined to create amusement only for others—the fire of her wit refused to burn unless well fed by sticks of applause, or if it burned, there was none of the crackling sparkle that was its greatest charm.

She liked her uncle, each week she spent with him increasing her regard. He was a gentleman, and he could talk when roused and interested, but lacking this, he was insufferably taciturn, not half so congenial a companion as her father, spite of his rough words and ways. The Squire, too, found the daily *tête-à-tête* becoming irksome ; with Cecil he might be silent or not, as he chose—he never thought of studying her, of being necessary to her amusement ; but Elinor was a woman who made her presence felt—agreeably, it is true, but still requiring attention and observance that he had not thought of with her younger companion. It was in his nature to be courteous to all women, but he hated the trammels of society, from being so seldom exposed to their sway, and it seemed to him that Elinor brought an atmosphere of conventionality into the room when she sailed in

in full evening costume. He did not understand the silent hint which this elaborate toilette—adopted only since Cecil's departure—was intended to convey. Elinor could see no obstacle now to enlivening the house with a few visitors. The best people were of course in town, and would not return till the end of June, but still, there were others who never went to London, and even mere country stay-at-homes would be a relief to this incessant monotony. It seemed to her that her uncle might echo her maid's opinion, that it was a pity to "*chiffoner ces belles robes pour rien du tout.*" French women certainly do not care to dress, unless they are sure their pains will be appreciated.

But it was not only her uncle's want of sympathy that was making the quiet of Elinor's life intolerable. She had received at intervals two letters, respectful, but urgent, from her principal creditor, the jeweller, who had supplied the ornaments already mentioned. She answered the first evasively, to the second she made no reply, hoping that James Fisher would come and tell her what to do.

In reply to her request for a meeting in the park, he had—without exactly refusing it—urged that it would be an imprudent step—it might precipitate matters. Elinor had fired at once, and much of the romance she had mistaken for love, melted into dull reality when she felt herself engaged to a man who was not physically brave enough to risk the chance of a personal meeting with her Uncle Dryden.

“Is it because he only cares for me as the heiress of Flairs?” she said proudly, “and he feels that discovery would crush such a prospect; if this is his feeling, the sooner we are parted the better.”

Her anger swelled almost into one of the tempests of former days, but she did not seek the North Gallery now as a refuge; she had lost all liking for her old haunt. She walked up and down her own bed-chamber with such fierce angry steps, that the old boards creaked under them. She should not answer the letter at all, and he might come down and ask the reason of her silence before he got a line from her.

But when day after day passed, and he neither came nor wrote, Elinor's wrath cooled; she began to find that James's letters had been butter to the dry bread of the monotony of Flairs, and that the excitement they had caused had been very pleasant. After all, would she have consented to marry a struggling barrister, except as heiress to her uncle's wealth? She had seen quite enough of a moderate income at her father's, to be certain that she could never exist on it. Well then, if she reasoned in this way—mortifying as it might be to her vanity, James had a right to the same feelings, she could not expect him to choose a wife without money; certainly if the worst befell, her uncle must always provide for her; he had said something once in former times, when he was very angry, about five hundred a-year. What nonsense! why she could easily spend a thousand on herself in six months, and people always spent the double of what they thought sufficient. Her father said so, and after all a man of the world like him must know something about money, though he had so little of it.

But although her anger against her lover subsided, she was resolved he should know that it had existed. She again told herself that her engagement had been precipitate, and that she had made an immense sacrifice in binding herself at all, considering the imperative terms of her uncle's conditions. For a few moments she was tempted to write and cancel it, but then came the remembrance of the enjoyment she had always found in his society; and suppose she met with no one whom she could even like as well—and at times she knew she did more than like him. Still, after all love must be a feeling greatly exaggerated, both in novels and poems; she never experienced the strange uncomfortable sensations therein pictured.

She did not know that she was much too full of self-worship to have room for another idol; he might reign in her fancy, or if he had sufficient power he might kindle passion, but he would not reach her heart.

No, she would not break off, she would do nothing hastily, she would at least keep faith with James till she had had a year's experience

of what society could offer ; but she wrote him a cold, disdainful letter now, apologising for having mistaken the nature of his feelings : the risk had not occurred to her as likely to prove an obstacle in his way, but now that he had pointed it out, she hoped he would excuse her want of consideration ; all this frigidly worded, in a few detached sentences.

The answer did not come at once, and Elinor grew feverish, almost ill ; her pride reproached her sharply for not having broken at once with this man, who had so little delicacy and regard for her feelings. For two whole days she was as silent as her uncle, and more abstracted, for she did not notice that he was watching her keenly.

On the third day her answer came. She felt too full of excitement and eagerness to open it at the breakfast table, and hurried from the room before her usual time, without making one of the excuses that she could frame so easily when required.

But Mr. Dryden took no heed of her departure. His eyes rested on one of his open letters,

but they were sightless, the neat clerk-like writing moved in confused irregular lines, his senses were dizzied by the shock, only some figures stood out clear and distinct at the bottom of the paper.

It was a small sum as to value, and yet it was large regarded as the extra spendings of a girl, who had hitherto had a fair, indeed a liberal allowance.

He had noticed her fondness for jewellery, and it annoyed him. He had also noticed since her return to Flairs several ornaments, which he imagined had been given her by Roland Markham. But, even supposing she had purchased them herself, he did not think they would nearly amount to the sum here mentioned. Still, that was nothing; what he was suffering from—suffering till his face grew white under its anguished expression—was the deceit.

If Elinor had got into debt—he writhed under the word—she ought at once to have appealed to him; she ought not to have suffered such a stigma to rest upon her name for an

hour; and by the letter before him, she had owed this money for many months.

He rose up hastily, crushing all his letters in one hand, and took his way through the old, deserted library to his writing-room.

He shrank from the casual chance of meeting a servant in the stone gallery, who might read the agitation written on his face.

For Elinor's sake he had better have avoided the library.

Facing him, as he entered, the stern features and passionate eyes of Sir Fulke reminded him of the degeneracy of his race. Such an error as Elinor's could not have been committed by a former Dryden. They would have starved rather than have spent what was not their own. And for what had this wretched girl so degraded herself and the name she bore? To feed a vanity the most reprehensible a woman could have, for it left all else at the mercy of those who could minister to it. He had forgotten Cecil Brownlow, and the revolution she had created in his ideas of women. Now his lip curled with the old misogynic scorn, as he told himself

he had only reaped the reward he might have expected, when he had dreamed of representing the Drydens by a woman.

We have all read of the labour of constructing a dyke, and how effectually, when constructed, if well watched, it will turn aside the course of even a mighty river; but if it be pierced by the cunning work of a skilful enemy, no prevention can withstand the force of the returning waters. They rear a crested head of foam, and pour through the aperture, which increases every instant, wave lashing on wave, to spread still more widely over their former territory.

And all the newly-raised trust in Elinor, founded on the softening of his own character and cemented by daily study of her seeming openness towards himself, and her loving behaviour to Cecil, was swept from existence in her uncle's mind by the flood of suspicion this revelation had let in, to seek its old channels, and to overspread and submerge the healthy, upspringing trust that had made him lately a happier, as well as a better man.

He stood still in the middle of the library, so fixed in the tension of thought, that not a muscle of his face moved.

It was not only Elinor's debt that had thus affected him. The jeweller, with much respect in the way of apology, enclosed Miss Dryden's last letter. Its insolence disgusted the Squire as much as it surprised him. It was an answer to an announcement on the tradesman's part that he should apply to her uncle—Elinor bid him beware what he did in this respect, unless he wished to lose her patronage when she was mistress of Flairs; which, she added, if he behaved with forbearance now, he might look for.

He had no real, warm affection for this girl, and therefore he had often told himself he had no right to expect any from her; but still, all unknowingly he had expected it, or he could not thus have suffered when he found that she already counted on his death. If it took all fierceness from his anger, it added bitterness to his sorrow. He was too truthful himself to think that she might have written for

mere effect, not realising the full force of the words to herself as they appeared on the paper, although she calculated the impression they would produce on others; and yet, he was actually right—the feeling had been but momentary with Elinor, but she was far too richly gifted not to see and realise what she wrote, as she wrote it.

Presently he moved and took a few steps towards the writing-room. He must come to some resolution. This was not a matter to pass over lightly, and yet he felt as if he could not charge Elinor with her crime.

Crime sounds a harsh word for what may be called, by those who think it so, the generous, thoughtless extravagance of a young girl, with the example before her eyes of such a father as Roland Markham; but to Mr. Dryden, the blackness lay in the deceit towards himself, and the tarnish she had so unhesitatingly cast on the name she bore.

It would have been nothing to her, then, to remain in debt for years. Sooner than deny herself a few worthless trinkets in the first step,

and in the second, sooner than humiliate her pride by confession to him, she would have let the name of Dryden remain as defaulting in this man's books, until his own death, or some chance gave her the means of payment.

"And I have seen in men to what this early taste for extravagance, or rather, this riot in spending what is not their own, leads—to every sort of mean subterfuge, to debt upon debt, which no after success in life, no inheritance ever frees them from. The taste grows and grows. If I were to make Elinor mistress of Flairs now, the estate would be mortgaged before ten years were over."

His head drooped wearily on his breast. He opened the writing-room door, and went in.

Was it to be always thus? Was life truly a dreary dungeon, whence there was no escape? Had these fair, pleasant thoughts and feelings he had harboured lately been only the delusive dreams that visit the luckless captive, chained to the damp, dismal floor, whence he cannot rise even to reach the sunbeam that for a brief space gilds a strip of the wall? For now, in his deep hum-

bling, it seemed as if he were beyond the pale of hope—that not one ray could reach him. He had settled his own doom, chosen his own future, and it held him in its iron grasp.

He sat down before his writing-desk, or, rather, he seemed to sink into his chair, as if in sleep.

After a little, there came a deep, gasping sob—only one—what he would have given then for the tears a weaker, happier man could have shed, he knew, while he scorned the craving.

His one effort was to concentrate thought on what had to be done, not to waste it in idle pity, either for himself or others.

He had never promised Elinor to make her his heiress unconditionally, but he had always felt that he virtually declared her so when he took her from her own home, and specially by this last recall.

Ever since Sir Stuart's death, and the secret it had revealed, a middle course had been opened to him, which he had at once resolved to adopt; but he shrank from this now—shrank from any future, in which Elinor appeared as mistress of Flairs.

The very thought put new vigour in him, the ghastly paleness left him, and he began to walk up and down the room—as he always did when agitated. All the power of his manhood rose against her. Should he, the last male heir of his line, be so base, so degenerate, as to hand over the honour—the hitherto spotless honour of his house, to a woman who set no store by it? Had he already forgotten how deeply her mother had disgraced it, and was not her daughter giving early promise of a more degraded career? besides, the first Elinor had covered her shame under the mantle of another name. If the second Elinor were to inherit Flairs, she would be a Dryden for ever; the mother of Drydens who would prove cowards, for cowardly men were the sure progeny of lying women, and had not Elinor's behaviour since her return to Flairs been a living lie?

No; he and Elinor must part, she must return to her father's home with a handsome provision for her life, but with the strict agreement that such provision was the limit

of her expectations from him ; he would see her once more, and then he would try to blot out for ever this other great mistake of his life. Why was he so unjustly treated ? why more hardly dealt with than any one whom he could call to mind ? His father had suffered grievously from the misconduct of Elinor's mother, but his misfortune had ended with her. Sir Stuart's life had been saddened by one lasting disappointment, but he had not by any miscalculation created fresh unending bitterness for himself, while he—he alone of all men—had failed in gaining the love he craved, had rejected tried friendship, had wilfully shut himself out from the solace of natural ties. In the only instance in which he had forced himself to show sympathy and interest, Elinor had punished him by his present suffering. Once he had brought himself to see that almost all these trials had been self-inflicted, but that was when under the influence of deep and purifying sorrow. Now he was the injured, not the injurer, and neither justice nor generosity stirred to adjust the balance of opinion.

And if he cast out Elinor, what was to become of Flairs? It would go to strangers, unless,—and Mr. Dryden paused in his rapid walking, and clasped his hands earnestly, as if he were struggling to be listened to by himself.

And it was so. Natural affection and justice would be heard, often as they had been trampled aside, and as they spoke more and more vehemently in support of his son's claims, so the inward tumult over-mastered him. He looked helplessly round, and then retreating to the fireplace, he leaned heavily on the massive marble shelf, as still as he had been when he first entered the writing-room.

CHAPTER VI.

MR. FISHER PLAYS FAST AND LOOSE.

ELINOR would have been less surprised at the calm tone of her lover's letter, if she could have seen what was passing at home. I say calm advisedly. The wording was by no means cold; but he passed by without comment her haughty speeches, urged her to tell him her troubles in writing, as affairs of importance would detain him in town for the present, and render it impossible for him to absent himself even for a day. The self-possession of the letter irritated her; she thought it was more the presumptuous tone Maurice Karse would have

used — James ought to have understood her better. A less self-confident woman would have taken alarm, and would have perhaps guessed that she was no longer Mr. Fisher's sole resource.

That "absence makes the heart grow fonder" may be true where love is true and strong also; but Elinor's influence over Mr. Fisher had been more an intoxication than a sentiment: away from its personal charm, his ardour cooled.

In spite of her sorrow Adelaide had regained bloom and freshness in the country, and when he first saw her again, the rich colour his warm greeting brought to her cheeks made him ask himself whether he had not made a mistake even as regarded looks between the sisters. Roland Markham was out, and his wife soon became absorbed as usual in the intricacies of her knitting. There was no one to help his conscience at reminding, so he sat down beside Adelaide, and asked her about her journey and her health, carefully avoiding all allusion to Elinor, till, long before the evening was over, he

found himself, or, rather, he had unconsciously returned to the old half tender, half playful talk he had been used to coin for Adelaide.

After all, she was so sweet, so forgiving, and so trusting. He began to wish he had never seen Elinor, that he had never come in the way either of her fascinations or of her prospective heiress-ship; and he did not quite believe in the last—at least, not till old Dryden's death; and then the Squire was not old, he could not be more than fifty, and he himself was thirty-five.

It has been said before, that except for his own personal ease and comfort, Fisher was not a money worshipper. He knew his own social inferiority, and he was too timid-natured to feel sure that he could assume his position as Elinor's husband and master of Flairs with ease to himself.

Adelaide did not awaken to her danger.

Roland Markham had not said one word about Elinor's engagement to either herself or her mother; and although Adelaide had fully realised its possibility on that last sad evening,

she tried to shut her eyes to it now—at least, as far as she could. James might not come, again—he probably would not; but they were friends—once more friends. Poor child! did she think that barbed arrow could ever lie quietly in her side, or only quiver with the even throbs of friendship?

She was restless and excited, but she told herself it was the change to home, from the idle life she had been leading. Was it that, too, that made her start at every knock, and long so feverishly for to-morrow?

She was in the school-room helping Fred with his lessons the next time Mr. Fisher came.

How well she knew his knock.

How tiresome Fred was to-night; would he never understand the rule she had read over to him at least three times? She felt the warm glow of excitement rising in her cheeks, and it seemed impossible to sit still and keep her eyes fixed on that smudged, dog's-eared Latin book, when she was hungering to fly up-stairs, not to lose a crumb of James's visit.

She was roused by Fred's earnest gaze.

"Why, Addy, how jolly slow you are to-night. I say, Mary, I'd done my line two good minutes before she found it out. There, now, don't be cross, Addy; if you hadn't frowned I was going to tell you, you looked as nice as the Queen of the Fairies in the pantomime Elinor took us to, with that pink colour in your cheeks.—My gracious, Addy, it's getting pinker! Here's a lark! I declare she's going into one of Nelly's rages! Oh, don't box my ears—please ma'am, don't."

He put his hands up on each side of his head, laughing as only schoolboys can laugh when they think they have succeeded in tormenting.

The tears sprang into Adelaide's eyes.

"For shame, Fred! it would serve you right if I left you to finish by yourself; but I shall stay and help you through one more line."

Her manner and her words were so contradictory and uncertain that Fred was puzzled; but he was far too lazy to reject the proffered help, although, as he said to Mary as soon as Adelaide went away, "he believed Addy's wits

had gone wool-gathering since she'd come home from the sea."

If they had, his reproof had greatly helped to recall them. Instead of going into the drawing-room, she passed up to her own room—the room she had yielded up to Elinor, and where everything served to remind her of her sister.

She could not deceive herself. If he really were to be her brother, then her own feelings for him were full of wrong, of treachery to Elinor.

She ought not to care for him more than she did for Fred. She dared not stay up there alone to face this sudden unmasking, or she should never have strength to go down at all; and painfully as she shrank from seeing him now, she yet longed with that passionate contradiction that only true love knows, for a gleam of hope.

Elinor and he might have become estranged, and then she shuddered at her own selfishness. If Elinor could make him happiest, James should marry Elinor if Adelaide's own pleadings were required to win her; only he must be less tender

towards herself. By the time she reached the stairs again she had decided that it had possibly been her own fault ; in her delight at meeting him she had gone back to the old terms, and he in mere kindness had followed her leading.

He was talking to her mother as she went in. She had an instant to master herself before he turned round. Then she spoke so very quietly, so coldly, with drooping eyelids and trembling voice, so much more like the pale, sad Adelaide who had left home a few weeks before, than the bright, blushing girl he had parted from so warmly only three nights ago, that Mr. Fisher stood looking at her in surprise.

But Adelaide's mind was resolved. If she hesitated in the line of conduct she took now, she could never change afterwards. She must begin as she meant to go on.

She crossed over to the table, took her work-basket, and sate down close beside her mother.

Mr. Fisher bit his lip in annoyance. Mrs. Markham to-night was enjoying a holiday from the everlasting knitting. She was deep in a

novel when he entered the room, and instead of laying it aside, she had merely half-closed it, putting in a knitting-pin to keep the place.

He knew as well as possible that as soon as there was some one else for him to speak to, she meant to go back to her story. Even while she listened, her eyes kept straying there, and then he should have Adelaide all to himself.

One of Mr. Fisher's gifts was a remarkable facility of adapting his conversation to suit all ages. Except with men who thought profoundly, he could always talk well; with these, feeling ill at ease, he had recourse to self-assertion, and became ridiculous. Now, interested as poor Mrs. Markham was in the fate of her heroine—who had been standing in a half-strangled state for twenty minutes—she could not help being amused by Mr. Fisher's talk; at the same time, she wished he and Addy would sit a little further off; there would be no comfort in reading, with conversation going on so very near her ears.

But it did not seem to progress. Adelaide answered in short abrupt sentences, scarcely

looking up from her work. James Fisher moved about the room irritably; this changeable girl should speak to him, and look at him differently before they parted. His love for her was full of self-confidence; he was so certain of hers, that he had neither doubt nor fear of removing this little cloud which had come between them. He thought perhaps the same tactics which had served him well with Elinor, would avail now. He left off studying the pictures, every one of which he had known by heart for the last ten years, and began to talk to Mrs. Markham just as she was calculating how soon politeness would allow her to go back to her book. It was too much for human endurance, when ten pages perhaps would put both her and the heroine out of their respective misery. She turned her knitting basket upside down, and then after a brief search among its contents, declared she must go and look for a pattern she had left downstairs.

Adelaide was surprised and disconcerted when her mother almost peremptorily refused her offer to seek the missing pattern, but Mr. Fisher,

who remarked that she did not leave her book behind her, quietly appreciated Mrs. Markham's manœuvre.

The instant her mother disappeared he went and sat down by Adelaide. He would have liked to take the poor trembling girl into his arms, and ask her why she was so cold and strange, but conscience pricked too keenly, and reminded him that some little explanation must be offered before he could expect her to believe him; besides, he did not want to break with Elinor.

"Are you not well this evening?" he drew nearer to her as he spoke.

Adelaide longed to be able to say her head ached, but it did not. She felt almost delirious with happiness, and yet she must thrust it from her. She tried to look at him steadily.

"I am quite well, thank you; the change has done me good." Her eyes fell beneath his, her courage was ebbing fast under the deep tenderness that filled them, then a sudden thought of Elinor helped her. "You hear from Elinor now, very often, I suppose; have you had a letter to-day?"

The words came in the hard, unpleasant tone that timid people mostly use when urged beyond their courage; they entirely overthrew James Fisher's calculations. After all his strict injunctions of secrecy, had Roland Markham betrayed his own secret?

"Who told you that your sister wrote to me?" he said. Adelaide thought he was vexed with her abruptness, but she could go on now, she was desperate.

"No one told me, but I thought, I imagined, you loved Elinor, and wished to marry her."

There was such a sudden gleam of hope in her eyes as she said this, that his way seemed clear again.

"Shall I tell you what you are?" he said, bending over her and whispering in soft stealing music that seemed to fetter sense and speech while she listened. "A darling, trusting girl, with only one fault: want of confidence in your own power of attracting and retaining." He had got possession of one of her hands now, and was caressing it tenderly. "Men cannot always explain themselves without compromising others,

and saying things which would be both cowardly and conceited. I only ask you to trust me, my child ; whatever you may see, whatever you may hear, believe in me only. Will you promise this, Adelaide ?”

And she promised, without another question, without another word of explanation ; how could she help it, when he drew her close to him and whispered that no love but hers could make him truly happy ?

She felt puzzled afterwards ; had he really not loved Elinor, or had he found what Adelaide felt firmly persuaded of, that Maurice Karse was preferred to him, and instead of a loving parting from her sister, had that last evening—which had made her so unhappy—witnessed a quarrel between them.

But had she not promised implicit faith and trust, even against the evidence of her own senses ? Whatever had happened, she had no right to unravel it ; every moment ought to be full of thankfulness for the great joy restored. It was almost more than her mind could grasp.

And meanwhile Elinor in her regal sense of power, thought she should let Mr. Fisher's letter wait a few days before she answered it; the delay would at least serve to show him his mistake in trusting so confidently to her affection for him, if impatience did not bring him down to beg forgiveness in person.

She would give him the chance. Meantime she wrote a long letter to Cecil Brownlow, entreating her not to betray the confidence she had placed in her, as it was most important the matter should be kept quiet for the present.

CHAPTER VII.

THE OLD QUESTION.

WHEN Cecil read Elinor Dryden's letter, she was not in a mood to receive its contents with any answering flow of sympathy or friendliness. She read every word of it carefully, and then crumpling it up, threw it in the fire.

"My dear Cecil, burn a note before you answer it? It's plain you'll never be an old maid."

"I think I shall then, aunt, though I don't like the word. You seem happy enough, and why should I not be the same?"

"You talk nonsense at times, child, as well as

other folks. A man's not a calf just because he happens to be born in a byre, and if your name's Brownlow it doesn't follow that you have the same vocation that I have."

"I don't know anything about vocations," Cecil spoke drearily, without a spark of her usual manner; "if I'm half as good and useful as you are, I've no doubt I shall make a tolerable spinster."

"Good gracious, child, what's the matter? I thought the prospect of a little change would brighten you up. I believe you are quite sorry at the idea of seeing your uncle and Mr. Karse to-night."

"I'm very glad to see Uncle Erasmus, but I—I don't care about strangers, you know."

They were in Erasmus's study, and Cecil could keep her face turned away from Aunt Jane's sharp eyes, while she arranged and rearranged one shelf of books with almost exasperating neatness.

"Strangers!" Miss Brownlow nearly upset the ink-bottle out of which she was replenishing those on the table. "Bless the child, what is

she talking of. Who's the stranger? Maurice Karse? Why you lived in the house with him for nearly three weeks, I thought?"

Here Miss Brownlow had at length the prudence to stop.

Cecil turned round, her face glowing with indignation.

"I can't help what you thought, aunt, but you made a grievous mistake if you thought I considered Mr. Karse as anything but a stranger—" then checking her impetuous tone, she went on more quietly—"I have finished these books now, aunt, and if you cannot give me any more to do, I've promised Jane a recipe from *Flairs*, which Elinor Dryden sent me in her letter this morning. Though I burned the letter, you see I kept the recipe." She laughed, as if she wanted to efface the remembrance of her little outbreak, and Miss Brownlow, although by no means satisfied with her niece's manner, thought it better to let her go.

"Only a bit of girl's contradiction, just to prevent me from seeing how glad she really is; but she has seemed dull and low spirited ever

since I told her—is it possible that that Squire can have said anything to prejudice her against Maurice?—I shall have to say something plain to that old man before I’ve done.—Well, and if he has, I shall leave them alone to work it off; no middle-aged go-between ever helped young lovers to an understanding yet; besides, there’s a freemasonry about real love—all it wants is opportunity, and that I’ll take care of. Oh, dear me!”

And Miss Brownlow having decided that the study looked “the thing,” retreated to her den.

Erasmus and Maurice were surprised and delighted to see Cecil. Miss Brownlow had not thought it necessary to say she was still in London, but her cold, indifferent reception chilled the younger man.

The shock of Ben’s death had been very sudden; it seemed to him that he might have been summoned in time to bid his dear, old friend farewell: it was the first earthly parting he had known, and it impressed him deeply. He told himself that he had been too tame under Mr. Dryden’s prohibitions—surely he owed Ben more than any living being—he forgot, for

the time, how Karse had always seconded the Squire's wishes, and urged his absence from Flairs; and then as time wore on, and the sharpness of his sorrow softened, he remembered that his only hope of unravelling the secret Ben had hinted at lay now in the Squire, and, unless he summoned him to Flairs, how was he to get speech of him. Should he go down there at once and force the truth from the Squire at the risk of offending him for ever? Mr. Dryden had said that Ben's effects had been reserved for Maurice, and would be delivered to him "on his return to Flairs," plainly hinting at some future time when his presence there would be expected.

Was it expected now?

He consulted Erasmus, although he had not much faith in his judgment as to practical matters; but his tutor was so decidedly opposed to his approaching Mr. Dryden without a decided summons, that he forced himself to endure suspense yet a little longer.

Elinor's silence, and avoidance too, of him—for he considered that she could easily have

cleared herself in his eyes if she had wished to do so—left her stained with the falsehood his own ears had listened to.

At twenty we are not prone to excuse the faults of others, and Maurice's truth was so entire and rigid, that this flaw in Elinor's had blackened and destroyed the fair image he had, as he now saw, ignorantly worshipped; but the cure of his blindness was wounding rather than healing, and he had gladly accepted his tutor's invitation to spend a few weeks among the woods and hills, although the woods were as yet but scantily clothed, and the weather was far from genial. But the quiet and loneliness fed his discontent—he was really relieved when the time of return came.

They had been home quite a week, and still Cecil kept the same formal, constrained manner towards him. At first Maurice attributed it to her recent sorrow, but it seemed as if any attempt on his side at sympathy or at a revival of their old intercourse, increased what he began to see and feel was fixed dislike towards himself. Miss Brownlow was puzzled too, but she wisely

concluded that it was best to take no notice, and also not to throw them too much into each other's company, lest Cecil's suspicions should be roused. They were together now, however; Maurice had been trying in vain to make Cecil talk to him, bearing gently and lovingly with her evident indifference—almost it seemed dislike—towards him, till his patience seemingly tired out, he turned abruptly to the table, and took up a book.

“Did you know that when I was at Flairs I was constantly with Elinor Dryden?”

Cecil was surprised at herself quite as much as Maurice was; but she was so indignant at his hypocrisy that she could bear it no longer. What did he mean by singling her out in this way, when he was or ought to be thinking only of another woman?

For several days past she had accused herself of conceit, and resolved that Maurice's manner meant nothing but common politeness, but she could hardly be mistaken now—or if she were mistaken, he must alter—it would be far better to quarrel at once with him than keep up a mere

pretence of civility, and receive attentions which he ought not to dare to offer her.

She had not felt bright or happy once since his return; the sooner this pretence between them was given up the better—and yet the sound of her own words startled her.

Maurice only said “Were you?” and then he stood looking at her, as if waiting for the end of her sentence.

Cecil felt in a dilemma: suppose she was mistaken after all. With more of her old sprightliness than he had seen since his return, she looked up in his face.

“You have grown strangely indifferent, I think; are you not at all interested to talk of her? or—” for his manner was calm and unmoved—“of Mr. Dryden, either?”

“I hear from Mr. Dryden, myself.” Maurice spoke coldly enough now.

There was a pause, for he felt bewildered in trying to guess Cecil’s drift—then, as a sudden enlightenment broke upon him, he said, looking fixedly into her eyes, “Did Miss Dryden speak of me, then, to you?—I beg your pardon,

I was very abrupt just now, but you puzzled me."

He seemed to wait eagerly for an answer, but Cecil did not know what to say. Elinor had spoken of Maurice, but in the special conversation of which she was thinking his name had not been uttered.

"I am not certain;" she hesitated, but Maurice's look made her feel she must go on. "Mr. Karse, I am sure you understand me, and I think you will agree with me, that I ought not to say any more."

Maurice stood still, listening, trying to gather in some definite meaning from her words.

"You must excuse me, Miss Brownlow; I am very stupid, I know, but I am utterly at a loss—I do not understand you at all."

For a moment she hesitated—why should she not believe him? then, ashamed and indignant at her own weakness—for had not Elinor a far greater claim on her regard?—she said stiffly—

"Really,—I am afraid I cannot make my meaning plainer;" and she walked out of the room.

Had he spoken the truth? or was he so trifling as to wish to please her when all his thoughts should have been filled with Elinor Dryden.

She sate in her room trying to decide, long after she left Maurice, and every moment the inclination to believe him became more irresistible.

Still there was no relief in this; it would have been far easier to believe him insincere: then he would have become totally indifferent to her, and the restraint in which she kept herself would have ended.

It was all very well to tell herself she would not think about him, but when she was listening to her Aunt's best stories she roused to find that she was calculating the time that would elapse before she saw Maurice again.

They rarely spoke to each other now.

Even Erasmus remarked that Cecil had grown shy and quiet, and that Maurice had turned silent, but the more vigilant Jane Ann noticed how her niece's eyes fell and how her colour deepened

when Maurice made his appearance in the drawing-room.

But she went on her way, taking no notice, although she began to think they were a long time making up their minds, and felt impatient to bring matters to a crisis.

Why are such people as Miss Brownlow always anxious to hurry the course of love, with its half-realised delicious mingling of joy and distrust? Leave it alone, ye whose blood has cooled, whose pulses beat far more feverishly in the adding up of thousands than in anticipating the keenest joys of love. All is haste in middle life—and remembering this, young lovers, and how little space the world's turmoil and speed will yield you afterwards, rest in the brief elysium while you can, and enjoy your happiness to the full.

Maurice was troubled and irresolute—a state of mind so foreign to his nature, that its very existence was a vexation.

In the beginning of his discussion with Cecil he had hoped that a few frank, outspoken words might overthrow the barrier her constrained

manner had raised ; but instead of this it had seemed that she was resolved to pick a quarrel at any price. The manner of her last words stung his pride deeply, but she looked so lovely as she spoke them, that perhaps they only strengthened his determination to win her love.

Maurice, like all men of his type, was an enthusiastic admirer of beauty, from a field daisy upwards ; and although he seemed to avoid speaking to Cecil as much as possible, he often sat or stood gazing at her, drinking in every detail of her loveliness. He wondered that Elinor's beauty had enslaved him. The remembrance of the one seemed to him a dark spangled splendour, full of glowing colour and of everything that suggested warmth and excitement ; the contemplation of the other was such perfection of happiness that he could not endure interruption while he indulged it. Cecil looked so very pure and child-like—it seemed to Maurice, sometimes, that it would be useless to talk to her of love.

But day by day passion was growing with these long gazing fits. More than once he left

the room abruptly. To remain near her and not to tell her of his love, was beyond his power.

The opportunity came before he expected it.

Cecil had been trying to read ever since her aunt left the room, conscious that Maurice's eyes had left his book to fix themselves on her face. All at once he spoke, and at the same time flung the book down and came and stood beside her.

"Miss Brownlow, shall you live here always?"

Cecil was frightened by his abruptness; but she had become accustomed to guard her feelings from Maurice's observation.

"I am not sure." She tried to smile, as if the subject of her departure were quite indifferent to her. "I believe Mr. Dryden is kind enough to wish me to return to Flairs."

It seemed to Maurice that she said this purposely to wound him; that she tried to remind him of the difference between them; that she was the guest and intimate friend of the Squire, while he was only his dependent—not even admitted to his table.

His jealousy broke through all restraints.

“And you wish to return to Flair, then? You prefer that stately grand life to being here?”

His angry words drove away the cautious guard Cecil had hitherto maintained over the inward tumult caused by Maurice's silent devotion. There was no fear lest she should misunderstand him now; he was displeased, and she could not bear that he should think hardly of her.

“I never said so—I never thought so. I like best to be here.” She looked up timidly, and yet eagerly, as if entreating him to believe her, and then she shrank away from the sudden change she saw in his eyes. “It is natural to like to be with my uncle and aunt.”

Her eyes were full of tears, and she blushed at the last words, half conscious of their untruth; but Maurice only heeded the gentleness of her answer.

“You think me a rough, rude boor,” he went on impetuously; “I must seem so to you, and I must risk your thinking so, for I cannot keep silent any longer. I have been longing to speak for days past, but I was afraid you would not listen.”

He stopped abruptly. Cecil's blushes were glowing crimson ; she felt as if she must stay the words on his lips.

" You mean because of what I said the other day—and, Mr. Karse, I am not sure that I ought to listen now."

But her looks contradicted her words ; there was no coldness, only trembling downcast confusion ; and with the hope of her love, a ray of enlightenment came to Maurice.

" I am not sure, but I fancy you are under some mistake about my relations with Miss Dryden ; there cannot be a greater mistake than to suppose there is any tie between us. Will you listen to me now, Cecil ?" he paused—there was no sign of avoidance or anger—only one of the small dimpled hands stole over her eyes as if the light shone into them too brightly. Maurice went on passionately : " Will you say you like to live where I am ? Will you even say you can be happy with me ? Will you let me try to make your happiness ?"

He bent down over her and took one of her hands in his with a gentleness very unlike the

fire of his words, as he went on with that rapid eloquence which visits silent men in moments of deep emotion, and which is so strangely thrilling to the listener. "I know how utterly unworthy I am of you, how rough my early training has been, and how little I am capable of speaking fitly to one so full of softness and refinement; but Cecil, if you knew how much your words and example have helped to raise me since I first saw you, you would believe in your own power over me for good. I loved you then, but not as I do now; my first feelings for you were little more than fancy; since there has come passion, and for an unworthy object. Now I love for the first time, as I did not know I could love before. Will you believe this, dear—dearest Cecil?—will you forgive me?—Will you trust your life and your happiness to me?"

His head was bent down so low now, that her faint "yes" sounded close in his ear. She tried to be brave and look up frankly, but she could not. The sudden joy had almost overpowered her, and her hand seemed as if it would press over her eyes.

But Maurice drew it gently away, he must see those sweet eyes, confess the Love he hardly yet believed in. Holding the little hand in his firm warm clasp, his other arm stole lithely round her waist, and drew her close to him. Then the blue eyes opened widely for an instant, as the virginal fear, his touch aroused, fled out at them; the crimson on her soft cheek deepened, the fringing lashes drooped again—but if the touch alarmed, it subdued. The wild bird that lives in a woman's heart, fluttered for a moment, and then folded its wings submissively, as Maurice drew her sweet face close to his own.

BOOK THE EIGHTH.

HARVEST.

CHAPTER I.

THE PICTURE IN THE WHITE BEDCHAMBER.

WHEN Mr. Dryden roused from that deep stillness, his face looked almost as deathlike as the grey marble on which he had been leaning.

He did not send for Elinor. He went steadily and determinedly to the entrance of the North Gallery, and passed through the red-curtained entrance to the door of the White Bedchamber. He did not hesitate with his hand on the lock now, he unfastened the door and went in quickly. Early as it still was, the light was indistinct from the closely-drawn blinds yellow with age, which shrouded each window ; it would have been more so but for the pale, almost ghastly, hue of the

walls—a dead white, pannelled into large irregular divisions by what had been broad gold lines, now corroded and black. The profuse gold decoration on the huge antique bedstead of richly-carved light oak had shared the same fate. Two Cupids lay supported in the air by a garland of carved roses and leaves, one of them holding the golden torch of Hymen, which the other seemed struggling to reach ; but the torch was blackened, and so were the horns of plenty and the doves, clustered round the top of the massive fluted pillars that upheld the lofty canopy.

Mr. Dryden went straight to one of the windows before he looked right or left, and drew up the blind. The light came in, but not freely,—it seemed to know its presence was not wanted in that deserted place, and the dust and cobwebs that covered the glass hindered its passage besides. Dust was everywhere—every footstep raised it.

As Mr. Dryden turned from the window he faced the bed, and his eyes fell on the Cupids. They seemed to be smiling at him in mockery.

He moved away hastily with a suppressed

exclamation, and advanced to the farthest side of the room beyond the bedstead. Here was a wide, old-fashioned fireplace, screened from the light, and from any draught that might be supposed to travel round the foot of the bed, by one of those huge Indian screens one only sees in museums and old country houses; the ground was chiefly white, but monsters of every imaginable form and hue disported themselves thereon, with protruding eyes and swollen bodies, relieved here and there with strangely drawn flowering plants and uncouth representations of waves. On the left of the fireplace was a tall, oblong space, covered with a stiff, black curtain. Mr. Dryden drew a key from his pocket, and fitting it in the side of the oblong space, the black curtain glided away, and showed itself to be the outer covering of a picture.

The picture of a very young and very lovely woman. There was youth in every full and rounded limb, and in the soft peach-like bloom on the skin. There was youth, too, in the profusion of dark-shining hair, and in the full firmness of the rosy lips, but the expression was too

sad for the years, and made the picture painful to look at by the very contradiction it suggested. The fresh loveliness seemed to protest against the sad heart it enshrined, almost to implore deliverance from something as foreign to its nature, as its own freshness was to the faded waste around it. Involuntarily you looked closer, so vivid was the conviction impressed that the sweet, bright face belonged to another temperament than that indicated by the almost tearful eyes. They were so large and lustrous, you longed to see them smiling, or full of the warm love their liquid brown depths must have known so well how to interpret. No one could have gazed on the face unmoved, or without an irresistible desire to learn the fate of the young being so sylph-like in her white gauzy drapery, so sombre in the revelation lent by the dark sadness of her eyes.

It was a full-length portrait, with foliage as background, and in small gold letters on one side of this were the words: "Lettice Dryden, born 18—. Married 18—."

This, then, was Wentworth Dryden's young wife. His dead wife. How could he stand there

draining his heart of feeling by the agony he wrung from it, torturing himself by dwelling on every charm, on every grace still life-like, on the senseless canvas, though the reality had so long since mouldered to nothingness ?

There was a beseechingness in the looks he fixed on her face ; it seemed as if that stern, hard man out of whose life youth had so early faded, was controlled and influenced by the mute beauty of this wife who had only known youth, who had passed away from his love before the shadow of change had come over her freshness.

Love !—who can tell the inner secrets of two hearts, made, or said to be made, one in lawful wedlock ? Only God knows the intensity of joy, and the depth of suffering husbands and wives can mutually give.

If the recalling of Love when it has been taken from us, doubtless for our good, leaving us with hearts bruised out of feeling, and eyes blinded to all but our own misery, if this at times maddens beyond the power of resignation which only time, by God's mercy, will bring, what

must be the anguish when union has been another name for suffering, when we look on the portrait of one whom we have worn next our heart, within it, even, and yet whose identity had never lost itself in ours, who has never been a part in that perfect and indissoluble union which makes but one of two natures, two sympathies, two wills, and yet who might have been so but for our own fault. If we had cared to study the nature of the tender flower we hastily transplanted to a strange soil, its sensitive fibres might have been strengthened, its whole system might have been moulded to its new surroundings, and instead of faded blossoms and premature decay, the lovely flower might have bloomed our own for ever.

Mr. Dryden stood in long, fixed thought; he knew the story of that young heart's sorrows now; the face had no perplexing enigma to offer him, but as he looked on it a shuddering sigh burst from him, the fixed resolution of his face faded, and a strange mixture of repugnance and indecision succeeded.

He had visited the picture but once since his

wife's death, and that was on the night following the run through Bucklebridge Wood. Then he had remained for hours in the White Bedchamber, not gazing calmly and sadly at his lost treasure, but prostrate before the picture, he had poured out some of the grief and remorse which Sir Stuart's confession had made his companions for life, and with them much of the jealous suspicion which had wound itself so closely into his nature. The shock, the sudden overmastering surprise of learning all which that confession had told him had uprooted settled convictions, and what he had thought ineradicable aversion, and he had left the North Gallery that night with a heart full of deep sadness, softened towards his fellow-men, and humbled into an earnest purpose of reparation.

And some of these thoughts had now returned, but the first glow had faded from off them, and their execution seemed more difficult than it had seemed then.

"Reparation"—the words came slowly—following the passage of his thought—"nothing

that I could offer would be reparation, but this would be none ; it would rather be a blazoning of what shall never be uttered publicly. Let me bear what blame I will, her memory shall not suffer."

So wistful a tenderness shone over his face as he stood looking on the picture, that he was scarcely recognisable as the hard, grey-faced man who had entered the White Bedchamber. The tenderness was sorrowful, but the rigid lines about his mouth were all unbraced, and his brows had smoothed from the sternness that knit them so closely.

It had always been said of him that he never swerved or faltered from a purpose, and yet a glance at the sweet sadness of that face seemed to have overturned all that he had forced himself to with so much effort.

He paced slowly down the length of the room, startling the dust so seldom disturbed there, his footsteps sounding with hollow distinctness on the old oak flooring.

His last determination with regard to Elinor had been to see her once more, and then to

send her away from him ; but there seemed to be in that room a spell against suspicion and resentment. Both tried to be heard, but a sudden perception that he ought first to listen to her own exculpation roused itself in his mind. He would do nothing hastily—he could not. Moreover, Elinor had not, as he now saw, committed the faults which he had specified as the condition of forfeiture, and setting her aside, the whole future disposal of Flairs was involved in his present decision, and this would be irrevocable, for he could never go back from his word once solemnly pledged.

He turned to the window, closed the blind again, and slowly left the room. However much that mute interview had softened his anger, he felt still strangely averse to an explanation with Elinor. As he passed out at the eastern end of the gallery, he looked towards the passage leading to the morning room. The expression of dislike came over his face that he had subdued while he stood looking at the picture in the White Bedchamber.

He felt that he must be calmer before he

could listen patiently to her excuses, whatever they might be, and there was much to be accomplished first. He went into his business room, took some papers and letters from an iron safe there, and then carrying these with him to his writing-room, he rang the bell, and gave orders that he was not to be disturbed by any one.

He went on writing—for hours still writing—additions seemingly to the bundle of papers he had brought from the iron safe.

Hour after hour passed, and he sat there, only varying the incessant monotony of his occupation by reading over the few last pages of his manuscript. He seemed to erase often, and when he did so it was with frowning brows and stern mouth, as if he were dealing strict justice on some one.

The dressing-bell sounded, for a moment he hesitated with a lingering look at his papers, then he rose, locked the door leading to the library on the inside, and also that which led into the gallery, when he had passed outside it.

Elinor was pre-occupied and silent at dinner-

THE PICTURE IN THE BEDCHAMBER. 117

time, but still she saw that the shadow of some change had fallen on her uncle. Was he ill? or were her fears realised? Should she be obliged to confess after all?

She tried several subjects of talk, and as each fell lifeless from want of response, her hopes sank and sank. The dinner had never seemed so long before. Surely the butler was not so slow and pompous every day.

But as soon as she rose to leave the room, unhopèd-for succour came.

"You must excuse my absence this evening, Elinor; I have business which will detain me for some hours."

He purposely avoided saying good-night. Elinor did not notice the omission; her heart gave such a sudden bound of relief as she listened, that she could scarcely suppress an exclamation.

She wanted to be alone as much as her uncle did; she must think over every possible chance of safety; above all she must be perfectly prepared for an explanation with the Squire, for she was certain now that Mr. Dryden knew the truth.

CHAPTER II.

ELINOR AND THE SQUIRE.

FOR several days time passed on, and the explanation was still delayed.

Still Mr. Dryden pleaded to himself the excuse of business, and went to his writing room every evening. Long after all the household slept he sat there writing page after page of manuscript, not rapidly as if copying from a book or some record of memory, but with long pauses of hesitation and difficulty.

It was no labour of love. When he rose from his desk his face had the sad, worn look of one who has passed a night of hopeless

watching for life or death, and after he had carefully locked the fast thickening packet in his desk and had gone to his room, he could not sleep, he could not even lie down on his bed till he had somewhat freed himself from the haunting ghost-like past his labours had evoked. His room was peopled with it, and yet only by an endless repetition of one figure; whichever way he turned there met him that graceful white-robed girl, her rich dark curls held back by a blue fillet, and that sad anxious gaze ever seeking his.

He knew what it was asking him, and though he meant to obey the spirit of its prayer, he would not do this in the letter. He tried to allay the restless dissatisfaction within, stirred up by those vision eyes, telling himself that his silence was for her, that the end would be the same, and that when he lay beside her, as once he had never thought or wished to lie, all his secret would be told to those whom it alone concerned. But in vain—and when his labour was at last over, and after carefully destroying what had evidently been a previous shorter re-

lation of the same events, he folded and sealed the fresh manuscript, he looked as dissatisfied, as unhappy as ever.

Even when, with as firm a hand as the gradually increasing emotion that had beset him at this last evening's task had left him, he wrote outside "*Not to be opened till after my death,*" there was no trace of the relief one might have expected to see on the face of a man who has completely achieved a hard and uncongenial work.

It was long after midnight when this was at last accomplished, but when Mr. Dryden had deposited the packet in the iron safe, he was conscious of a strange throbbing, not at his heart only, every muscle and sinew seemed to have been overstrained, and now suddenly released, quivered back to its accustomed place with a tremor that was almost sickening.

He stood leaning against the safe in wonder at his own weakness, for the physical trembling was not its only manifestation ; large warm tears swelled slowly from his eyes, and trickled down his cheeks. For a few moments they

eased the aching misery he had been bearing so bravely, but the exhaustion that followed their strange unwonted presence became faintness.

When at last he wearily reached his own bed-room, the darkness was merging fast into a broad grey expanse, breaking more and more towards the east into fleecy masses, that seemed chased by the rising day-god.

The Squire opened the window and looked out; the hushed air—not fully wakened yet—came in with a cold stillness that revived, though it could not brace. He shivered and closed the window. In that grey glimmer he looked full ten years older than when he began his task a week before, as if life-blood from body and spirit had alike been drained.

Elinor had passed some restless days of alternate hope and despair. She saw her uncle's change of look and manner, and yet she dared not remark upon it. Let what would happen, the explanation should come naturally, no act or word of hers should hasten it.

The silence between them grew more and more oppressive. She could not reconcile the

evident disquiet, the sunken eyes and hollow cheeks that became daily more remarkable, with the displeasure caused by her extravagance.

Some deep sorrow—to which she was not admitted—was slowly wearing away her uncle's life.

"It is his own fault," she said resentfully, "if I do not lighten his sorrow for him; his own act is fast restoring day by day the coldness that estranged me from him in childhood."

But a sharp sudden fear passed through her when she was at last summoned to the writing-room. She had almost begun to hope that her fault was buried safely, and that it had had no part in her uncle's strange behaviour. If after all he had discovered her engagement to James!

She went into the room in a sort of stunned silence. She took the chair her uncle gravely placed for her, and then she sat and heard in the same unawakened stupor, the charge brought against her, and the proofs adduced.

Mr. Dryden paused and looked at her; her eyes were widely opened, as if they too were

striving to take in his sad reproachful words, but except for their strained gaze at vacancy, and the quick heaving breath—which rose and fell with fluttering eagerness—she might have been hearing some fact in history, or some abstract reasoning. There was no change of complexion, no trembling mouth, nothing to indicate the presence of Fear.

Was she, then, completely hardened, lost to all sense of the degradation she had brought on her name?

He had told her all her fault—of disgrace, of deception, and broken faith with him—not harshly; for reasons of his own he tried now to be as lenient as he could. But when he saw her unchanged posture—the absence of any shame or sorrow, he went farther.

I have said that he paused and looked at her; then he spoke again; and this time, there was a pain in his voice, a shrinking from the very words he said, which before their sense had reached her ears, found its way to her heart.

But when she gathered in his full drift, when she saw that her thoughtless, hastily-written

words had suggested that she was not only counting on his inheritance, but calculating on, and rejoicing at, the prospect of his death, the spell that had held her speechless, broke.

She threw herself on her knees, and clasped one of his hands to her so vehemently, that he could not have freed it without violence, exclaiming, with a passion that alarmed her uncle, that her foolish words had only been used as a threat to enforce the jeweller's silence. She implored him to listen—for he turned his head away, distressed by her agitation—not to forgive her fault, not to take her back into his favour—her rapid utterance began to be choked by sobs, as she went on with the frenzied eagerness, that dreaded he might all at once refuse to listen—

“I know I dare not, cannot ask for forgiveness; but, in mercy, believe, that I could not have harboured such a thought as that! Oh! uncle, uncle”—she kissed his hand, while her tears streamed down on it—“you could not think me a murderess, and should I not be one in intention if I had counted on the end of your life?”

I am ungrateful, deceitful, vain ; but I am not so base as not to love you !”

Vehement, convulsive sobbing choked her words ; but her imploring, streaming eyes, told that she had not half uttered the agony of her repentance.

Mr. Dryden bent forward, and tried to raise her ; but she shook her head, only clinging to his hand, as if its touch gave her hope.

He was deeply moved by her self-accusation, though he shrank from the wildness and abandonment of her grief—shrank both from its present manifestation, and from the strength of passion it revealed. Her violence seemed more to be dreaded than her extravagance.

Could such an uncontrolled nature as this, he asked himself, in shocked silence, ever fulfil steadily and calmly the duties of a wife and a mother ? He could not understand a temperament with which he had no sympathy, but he tried to give some comfort.

He begged her to be calmer—to rise, and listen to what he had to say ; for he could not talk to her while she remained kneeling. And

Elinor rose humbly, with swollen, stiffening eyelids, crushed for the moment out of all her pride, except that which whispered, her uncle had not been generous—had not sufficiently felt the depth and effort of her humiliation, or he would have met it less coldly.

Is not this one of the severest tests we apply to human friendship? Elinor's case was an exceptional one, but how often, in confessing a minor fault—in confiding our own nervous misgivings, we expect man to be God-like; and then we cry out against want of generosity. There are hearts—and when we meet with them, we should, if we are wise and grateful, thank God on our knees daily for such a boon—which never forget that to bear others' burdens, is to fulfil the whole law of Christ. But in general, if we must bear blame, it is happier for us to resolve to bear it bravely and unsupported by human sympathy; and for our misgivings, to trample them deep in our hearts, and let them writhe and die there silently.

But Mr. Dryden spoke at last. He told her that he believed her; but then he checked the violence with which she tried to show her grati-

tude for this, and asked her to be calm, if she could, and, looking into her own heart, to tell him whether, if he trusted her again, he should reap the same reward ?

“ Stay, Elinor ”—he spoke more firmly ; and he got up from his chair, and went and stood opposite to her. “ Do not be in a hurry to protest and vow amendment, for I may only offer as a reward what you may esteem less preferable than a free life, uncontrolled by me.”

“ I have deserved it,” she said, sadly ; “ but, uncle, you could scarcely punish me more bitterly than by such words.”

He was moved deeply at last ; for the first time he thought he saw entire submission. He spoke more gently.

“ Listen, if you can, without interruption. It seems to me, for I have studied you more deeply, perhaps, than you are aware of, that your principles are unfixed to any decided standard of judgment, and your temper and impulses wholly uncontrolled. You are more than twenty years old, Elinor. If you do not want to be the slave of your own passions, the sport of any sudden, un-governed impulse all your life long, you will put

yourself to school to-day, and work hard and untiringly to conquer self. If I did not see in you, also, vital energy, and a strong, decided will, frankly, I should have little hope of your success ; but although you have not absolutely forfeited my conditions, I cannot make you heiress of Flairs on such a contingency. I must choose another representative to bear the responsibility with you."

He bent his eyes keenly on her ; but if she felt any shock of disappointment, she was already exerting the control he had evoked, for she sat passive, her hands lying listlessly in her lap, her drooped eyelids still wet with the tears that glistened on their fringes.

Mr. Dryden hesitated ; there seemed some obstacle in the way of his further speech, for he walked up and down the room once, while he deliberated.

" I have some explanation to give you on this head," he said at last ; " but I think, for you and for me, it will now be more easily written than spoken. I will send it to you this evening, and you can let me have your answer as you like

best : only, do not decide hastily against any proposal I may make to you. Control yourself first, and do not be guided by impulse."

She rose falteringly and turned to go away, so unlike her usual queenly self, that his pity had a touch of remorse in it.

He held out his hand, and as she placed herself gently in it, she was resolved to show him her self-mastery had begun. He drew her nearer and kissed her forehead ; then great, hot tears rolled down her cheeks, so fast and thickly, that she turned hastily away, for fear she should again arouse Mr. Dryden's remonstrances.

Poor blind mortals ! How little these two could ever know of each other. Just then she might have thrown her arms round him—have lightened her heart of its other secret, and he would have forgiven her. It was one of Life's opportunities for Elinor, and, like all others in turn, she missed the tide.

CHAPTER III.

THE PLOTTERS.

ROLAND MARKHAM's face was not pleasant to behold; it was always an effort with him to keep a sneer off it, and now he made none—he rather seemed to have called the evil spirits in from every side, and to have given his features up for distortion. Anger and baffled cunning were there, but below these glowed a revengeful passion that expressed itself in his fiery, blood-shot eyes.

He flung a letter down, and dashed his clenched fist on it with a noise that startled his companion.

"Curse him," he said, "why is he to win every race? why is he to rob and cheat me and mine in this fair-seeming, honest way, for ever? Confound you, James, have you not a word to say? are you going to sit down tamely under this?"

Mr. Fisher had heard from Elinor, and had brought the letter to Roland's office. He did not wish the contents to reach Adelaide's ears; if she learned that Elinor had broken faith with him, she must also learn that faith had been plighted, and that to herself he was only a forsworn traitor; and now that all was over, he saw that he had been deceiving himself—that he really had loved Elinor, and that he could not bear to yield her up without a struggle; and he told Markham so in answer to his question.

"Then what the devil do you mean to do?"

For in his blind rage it seemed monstrous that Fisher should have come off straight to him, calmly to communicate intelligence which ought to have carried him down to Flairs, to insist on justice being done to Elinor.

"I don't know," said James; and again there was silence between the two men.

Silence of anxious thought on the one side, utter inability to shape feeling in words on the other.

Just then Markham was furious with the whole world—uncontrollably so with his own special portion of it, Wentworth Dryden, Maurice Karse, his daughter Elinor, and Fisher—all had wronged him, all had helped, either actively or by their passive yielding to the will of others, to baulk the darling cherished scheme of revenge, which he had nourished so long.

The reader is getting impatient, and so it is best to say at once the purport of Elinor's letter.

She wrote to her lover that it was not her uncle's intention to make her his sole heiress, and she therefore released James from his promise; that her uncle had other views for her, and that she was determined not to marry against his will.

She exhorted Fisher to remember that any pain he now felt would be forgotten if he reflected on

the misery so poor and so extravagant a wife would have caused him. "I could not have loved a man long," the letter ran, "had I found him powerless to gratify all my tastes and wants, nor would you be happy under the galling pressure and daily mortifications inseparable from a limited income. Believe me, I am less selfish in freeing you now, than you think me." She ended by recapitulating her uncle's long continued goodness towards her, and asked if it would not be most ungrateful and unnatural to resist his will now.

No wonder they both felt as perplexed as they were angry; for, underlying this cold-blooded reasoning was a tone of deep regret, as if to make Fisher feel, that although from the highest and purest motives—his own happiness and her duty to her uncle—she thus renounced him, still that she was the sacrifice—bleeding inwardly from the wounds that others might accuse her of dealing.

"And why, in the name of Heaven, does she not write to me?" Roland went on angrily; "I'll tell you why, Fisher, if you have not found

out for yourself—she's afraid to do it. I suppose you are not quite such a flat as she seems to think you are. I've been making up my mind in these last few minutes while you have been sitting there arranging your whiskers;" he spoke with a concentrated bitterness that both startled and annoyed his listener. "You'll excuse the strength of the language, but you're a fool; you may think I go through the world with my eyes shut, but I don't: I told you once, that if you played fast and loose with Elinor she was not the girl to stand it, and that's just what you have done since her sister came home. I have heard of it, and so has she, you may depend on it, and when Flairs is offered to her with only the penalty of a husband attached to it—which I expect you will find is the real meaning of her letter—she throws you overboard. Serves you right!" he went on rudely, regardless of Fisher's eager words: "you have not behaved well to either of the girls, even supposing you care nothing about Adelaide; but you have behaved far worse to me, who stood by you all through, even

to the length of bullying that young fellow, when I believe he was in real earnest about Elinor."

"Stop, Markham." Fisher had roused for once out of the apathy in which he usually passed through life—giving offence, as he said, to no one. "You are going too far; if I fell into your plans in this matter, became your tool, in fact, it was from love of your daughter, not from a mercenary desire to see my wife mistress of Flairs; so far as she is concerned I am sorry, very sorry that she should lose her expectations, but if she is still willing to abide by her engagement to me, I cannot see that this loss hinders its fulfilment; in fact, it hastens the prospect of such a fulfilment."

Mr. Markham could not quite control the intense surprise his face expressed now. Had Fisher then entertained no suspicion of the part he would have been called to play as his son-in-law? could he for a moment suppose that Elinor was fitted for such a sphere as that of the wife of a struggling barrister? his singular rapidity of thought checked the rising

scorn before it found vent in words; if James were so unsuspecting, and all could yet be defeated, it would be a pity to quarrel utterly—to say words that never could be unsaid; if he must risk the loss of Flairs he could be revenged on Wentworth Dryden.

He spoke in a much calmer voice in reply.

“Well, man, why do you not run down to Flairs and say all that to Elinor? such disinterested love would move a much harder heart than hers, I fancy; do this quietly—keep out of Dryden’s way you know, and leave off flirting with Adelaide, which I frankly tell you I object to, and I think you may win Elinor yet, and, unless I greatly mistake, live at Flairs after all. Have you no suspicion,” he turned sharply round on his cousin, who was looking at him with eager interest, “as to who the *heir* must be? the heir, and as I feel every instant more sure, Elinor’s destined husband also.”

Their eyes met in one long, steady look, but Markham stopped the answer that came to Fisher’s lips.

“Yes, I see you do—the less we talk about it the better; because to Elinor you had best know nothing. I think something may be done, but you must see me again before you go to Flairs, and you had better leave me alone now; you see she says sole heiress, which, I take it, means that if she won’t marry to please him he’ll only give her half the property; now go, there’s a good fellow.”

And Mr. Fisher had no resource but that of going away unsettled and discontented; he could not bear to yield up Elinor tamely, and yet there was truth and sense in what she said; but if there were the slightest chance left he would strive his utmost to win her back, although the notion of seeking her clandestinely at Flairs was an extremely distasteful one; yes, he was convinced now he loved Elinor, and therefore he supposed, after what Roland had said, he must throw Adelaide over finally; poor little girl, it would be very unkind—he knew she prized his visits, and looked forward to them; it seemed both hard and unnecessary to deprive her of such an innocent pleasure,

but he could not disregard her father's positive prohibition. It was a reprieve that there was no immediate need to hurry off to Flairs—meantime he could pave the way by writing to Elinor.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SQUIRE'S PROPOSAL.

ON the evening following her interview with her uncle, Elinor received a letter from him. She laid it down on the table beside her, and looked at it. It seemed to her that the fate of her future life was in that sealed envelope—for the Squire had said he should wish her to decide for herself.

“And it is something of importance,” she said sadly, “for he told me not to hurry in making up my mind. Oh dear! what a difficult life mine has become lately.”

She leaned her head on her hand; it ached

and throbbed. The excitement of the last few hours had not really tried her so much as the strain of expectation during the past week. It had come now—the dreaded something she had been waiting for, and with it the weary lassitude of reaction.

She stretched out her hand and opened the letter sharply. The first words relieved her fears. The Squire alluded to her fault, but in very gentle words; he let her see, without exactly saying so, that the concealment had grieved him more than the fault itself; he had trusted her fully, he said, and for the future he hoped she would so trust him.

Elinor breathed deeply—"But that would have settled the matter, I should have thought. Whatever has he filled two more pages with?—Oh, I forget, I am to decide something."

The next page was plainly less satisfactory; her brows knit and her cheeks flushed angrily; but when she reached the bottom, she smiled a half-flattered, half-vexed look on her bright face.

"Well! to think of Uncle Dryden, of all men,

turning match-maker. It is the most ridiculous arrangement I ever heard of;—Maurice Karse too—whatever could make him choose him? Well, I'll finish it before I begin to think."

The Squire reminded Elinor that he had reserved to himself the right of helping her in her choice of a husband—a right he said which he did not mean to have exerted so soon, but these last circumstances had shown him that it would not be well for Elinor to be left solely to her own guidance should he himself be suddenly taken away from her, and he therefore thought it better to tell her at once that his choice had fixed on Maurice Karse. "In marrying you," said the Squire, "he will take the name of Dryden, and I shall consider him, with you, as joint inheritor of Flairs. Do not think this proposal premature or unnatural; it has been long and well considered, and but for what has lately happened would have been brought before you more gradually; but my health is much impaired Elinor, and it would give me infinite relief to see you and Maurice promised to each other at once, and to feel that your future was secure.

You have seen Maurice, and have conversed with him, and I ask you to trust me fully and entirely. If you have taken up against him any decided prejudice, it will be better to tell me so at once; but I can scarcely think this is probable. You shall not be hurried, nor shall you see Maurice more frequently than you wish; but I remind you again that the life of a man of my age is uncertain, and it would be a great comfort to me to see you promised to each other, without delay, and to feel that by complying with my wishes in this matter you have secured to yourself your position at Flairs."

"Position at Flairs!" Elinor was not wholly mercenary; but to give up Flairs, and all her long-cherished, long-lived-in dreams of luxury and position—to sink at once and for ever into a lower sphere of life—for she saw that only as Maurice's wife could she regain her uncle's confidence—was a very bitter trial. But would not James's love compensate for all? would it not be truly heroic to give up all for his sake?—And then the remembrance of the shifts and contrivances and anxieties, daily, petty, wearing

anxieties she had witnessed in her own house, came back, and some of the sweetness vanished from her cup of bliss. Her uncle stated the income he proposed to settle on her in case she could not bring herself to fulfil his wishes ; and Elinor felt that considering how she had deceived him, it was generous beyond her expectation ; but still, spite of her deceit about James Fisher, she felt angry and deeply mortified.

She flung the letter away from her, and threw herself back in her chair.

"He tells me to take time to think," she said ; "and it is a good thing he does tell me so. If I followed my own impulses just now, I'd march downstairs to the writing-room, and tell him I won't marry a ready-made husband to please him or any one. What a detestable idea!—it is taking me in, too."

But when she went to her desk and read the carefully preserved letter on which, in her own large, clear writing, were the words "*Conditions of my Heiress-ship*," she could not say Uncle Dryden had acted unfairly. It was quite possible he had always meant her to marry Maurice, and

that was why he had bound her so strictly not to fall in love with any one else.

She took up the other letter again. Mr. Dryden bade her think well and patiently on both sides of the question. What was the other?—

To marry a man who had shown that he loved her passionately ; to be mistress of Flairs, and to obey and satisfy her uncle ; in other words, to be free and independent for the rest of her life.

Elinor kept her thoughts steadily fixed on this line of argument, and while she did so a hundred specious excuses helped her self-conceit.

She did not state these reasons for rejecting James, as I have stated them ; they would have sounded practical, utterly matter-of-fact.

This was the way in which she saw the matter, after a long pause of thought.

She owed an atonement to the Squire, and that atonement should be the sacrifice of her future life to his will, although that will must for ever separate her from the lover of her choice. She might in time “learn to love” Maurice ; but he could never, never make her as happy as

James would have made her. She might be free and independent, so far as money was concerned, but she should have to submit her will to Maurice's—to be a submissive wife. Conscience whispered, but so faintly, that she scarcely retained the sense, that Maurice would develop every good there might be in her far more than her cousin would ; but another thought sprang up to claim attention—if she professed willingness to be affianced to Maurice, her uncle need never know of this other secret, and the last explanation had cost her too much shame and humiliation to make another endurable, even in anticipation. She could consent to obey him with perfect truth. There was no need to expose all her past feelings to Mr. Dryden. When she sacrificed herself so nobly and entirely for his sake, surely she had a right to choose her own way of doing so ? Did no thoughts of the chill that had come over her lately, with regard to Mr. Fisher, help these resolutions ? If so, it was unconscious even to herself ;—but the motives of self-deceit wear very white garments of such an opaque texture, that it requires a searching eye to detect the

black reality that lurks beneath ; and this probably hindered Elinor from thinking, as a less heroic woman might have thought, of her broken faith, or of the blight she might thus cast on her rejected lover's life. On the contrary, towards him even she was self-sacrificing, for how could she burden and drag him down into mediocrity ? Doubtless he would find some other heiress to console him for her loss.

The prominent thoughts in her mind now, as she sat quietly in the morning-room awaiting Maurice's arrival, were the noble sacrifice she had made to please the Squire, and the expected arrival of Maurice Karse. Her uncle had received her submission with entire confidence ; he seemed resolved to try whether full, frank trust would not beget its like. He had told her that Maurice was not so unequal to her in birth as she might imagine ; that he was in fact—although from peculiar circumstances it had been necessary for a time to keep this secret—a Dryden, and then his quiet determined look came into the Squire's face, and warned Elinor against further questioning. She was surprised ;

and yet ever since she had seen Maurice in London her old first imaginings that he was better than he seemed, had at times returned, only she had fancied that Ben himself was better born, and merely lived as he did at Flairs, in willing obscurity.

Maurice a Dryden! She no longer shrank from the idea of seeing him as the death-knell to her feelings for James; a keen interest was awakened in what seemed to her a bit of real romance. Had the Squire been ignorant in former times of the boy's parentage, and was it this discovery that had made him interest himself in his education, for from Maurice's own admission he owed everything to the Squire?

Her thoughts strayed back to the time when Maurice had been treated, both by herself and her uncle, as a gamekeeper's lad—Elinor could not resist a slight shudder. Was her uncle quite sure now? and then she recalled Maurice's noble face and lofty bearing, and told herself these could not exist without gentle blood.

But the day passed away and he did not

come. Next morning's post brought much perplexity both to Elinor and her uncle.

Mr. Fisher wrote to appeal against her decision. He said that if he were perfectly indifferent to her loss of fortune, surely it need not trouble her? He implored her to see him; he would come down to Flairs whenever she pleased, and then he trusted to convince her that she was sacrificing them both to a mistaken unselfishness, and an overstrained sense of duty. Elinor felt herself persecuted; as it was, it was very hard to bear; why need James write and make her task the harder? for although she vehemently told herself that his name was written on her heart—she might in time like Maurice, but he could never efface the remembrance of her former lover—still she had grown eager about Maurice's coming, and deeply interested in the half-revealed mystery that seemed to overshadow him. Now she had a remorse in thinking of him at all; James was plainly unhappy, and also disposed to question the necessity of what she had done.

But where was the use of disquieting herself?

Elinor decided at last that delightful as it might be to take a last farewell of her cousin, still the risk would be too dangerous, he must not come to Flairs. She had made up her mind once, why not close it firmly against such appeals? they could but harrow her feelings and increase the efforts of her sacrifice. No, she was in the path of duty, she would follow it to the end.

She sat down directly she left the breakfast-table, and wrote a firm refusal to James's offer of coming down to Flairs.

CHAPTER V.

ROLAND MARKHAM'S DISCOVERY.

THE same post that carried Elinor's first letter to her rejected lover, brought to Maurice Karse a summons from Mr. Dryden to start as soon as possible for Flairs.

The letter was kindly worded, but was more peremptory than explicit; it merely asked him to come with as little delay as possible, and said that the Squire wished him to remain for some time. The last words were very unwelcome. To leave Cecil just as he had won her to love him, to move out of the warm sunshine of her presence into the cold stately atmosphere that

was inseparable from Mr. Dryden, seemed impossible at first.

The lovers had taken Miss Brownlow into their confidence ; but when Maurice proposed to speak to his tutor, she interfered, and told him to leave all to her—Erasmus must see how things were going on, and that it was better he should find out for himself, meantime she would prepare the way.

“ I will let you know as soon as I have talked to him,” she said ; “ that will give you time, Maurice, to get a little speech ready, and rattle it off without any stammering.”

Being resolved in her own mind to interpret her brother's silence as consent, she thought the longer it was left undisturbed, the better ; honestly, her courage failed her now that matters were settled, for good and excellent as he was, Erasmus had turned restive on her hands before now, and if he retained any remembrance of that unlucky letter of Mr. Dryden's he might compromise matters greatly ; probably his first step would be to send Cecil back to Flairs.

When Maurice told them at dinner-time of his summons, Miss Brownlow felt for once checkmated ; had Erasmus been sly enough to write and warn the Squire, and was Maurice sent for to be lectured, and probably placed with another tutor ? She could hardly believe the last suggestion, for she knew how anxious her brother was to send his pupil direct from him to Oxford.

To her surprise, both Mr. Brownlow and Cecil urged Maurice to start at once for Flairs, without delaying for another day, and when the lovers were left alone together, Cecil continued to wish what Maurice declared to be impossible.

"You do not know the Squire as well as I do, dearest," she said, clasping both her little hands round his arm, while he stood looking down into her fair upturned face, wondering if he were dreaming, or if such a prize were really his ; "you may have known him as long as I have, and yet from all you say, you do not understand him so well ; he hates to be deceived or thwarted. I do so wish that you

would go to him at once, to-day even, and tell him openly of our love."

And while Maurice was assuring her that he meant to have no secrets from Mr. Dryden, and was reproaching her also for her impatience to send him from her, words were passing almost within hearing that were to change the whole story of his life.

As Mr. Brownlow crossed the hall, the street door was being opened, and he found himself face to face with Roland Markham.

They had just a bowing acquaintance, Mr. Brownlow having studiously avoided any intimacy with his patron's brother-in-law.

Erasmus gave such a look of dismay at his unexpected visitor, that a less impudent man would have hesitated before he forced an unwelcome entrance; but Markham had shaken the philosopher heartily by the hand before he could recover himself, and then looking towards the study door on the right as if he knew by instinct where to go, he said—

"Can you give me two minutes? I really won't detain you longer."

As soon as the door was safely shut on them, he said he had business of importance to communicate to Mr. Maurice Karse, whom he believed to be an inmate of Mr. Brownlow's house.

Erasmus hesitated. He did not like what he had heard of this man ; but still Maurice was no longer a child—he must mix with good and evil in the world, and learn to distinguish for himself.

“I will send him if he can spare the time, but I believe he is going down into the country this afternoon.

Markham could scarcely suppress an exclamation—he was on the right track.

“Yes, I knew it,” he said, “that is just what I wanted to see him about. Perhaps if he goes to-day he would trouble himself with a small commission for my daughter, who, I believe, you are aware, lives with her uncle, Mr. Dryden, of Flairs.”

Mr. Brownlow was taken by surprise, but his simple dreamy nature was not fitted to read Markham's. He understood the words to mean only what they stated.

"Yes, yes," he answered, "I had the pleasure of being introduced to Miss Dryden in the winter; if I may presume to say so, she is one of the most charming young ladies I ever saw."

"I believe that's a general opinion," said Roland. He was trying to decide whether it would be wise to sound Erasmus as to Maurice's feelings; but no, pupils and tutors were not likely to know each other's secrets. "Then you think your young friend will give me half a minute?"

He looked at the clock on the mantelpiece impatiently. He knew that if Maurice meant to reach Flairs that evening he would soon be on his way to the railway station; and unless he had thoroughly deceived himself, he had that to tell the young man which would separate him from Flairs for ever.

Erasmus saw the look, and left the room to fetch Maurice, while Markham once more ran over his own chain of evidence, to make sure that there was no missing or defective link.

To find Maurice starting for Flairs had riveted

conviction on his morning's speculations. From the time James Fisher left him he had perseveringly followed out the suspicions aroused by Elinor's letter. At first it was all darkness; although his thoughts had naturally flown to Maurice, still he could give himself no tangible reason for the surmise. All his own and Fisher's efforts had failed to discover that the West Indian Dryden had left any child—had married, even. Who, then, was this heir, who was to be foisted into the property, and to whom Elinor was to be sacrificed, for she had underlined the word "sole" in her letter, therefore there must be some one with whom she was to share the property. But he could find no clue to lead him forward; he seemed to be only pulling at a loose thread, thereby tangling the skein into a confused and inextricable mass.

With all his dislike to Wentworth Dryden, in his secret heart he had looked on him as an open adversary; but this—supposing it to be what he feared—seemed a deep, well-laid scheme; it would fulfil Elinor's expectations, but how? in such a manner as to exclude all in-

terference or participation on her father's part, would make her, in fact, entirely dependent on her husband, who would doubtless be bound over by the Squire to hold him, Roland, at a safe distance for ever.

There was yet another hypothesis. Somehow—he could scarcely have told in what shape the information had reached him—he had learned that, since the fever at Starby, Dryden had become a changed man. It might be that in the fervour of what Mr. Markham was pleased to call his “middle-aged saintship,” he thought of selling the property after his death, and bequeathing its proceeds to hospitals or charities, or “some of the other Tomfooleries that plunder relatives of their dues now-a-days.”

But this accorded ill with all that he had heard of the Dryden pride of race. The Squire could never brook that aliens in name as well as blood should stand in his place; besides, there were Elinor's words plainly pointing at some marriage planned by her uncle. Something was under all this, something which possibly had been long in existence, but to which

he had been blinded by the certainty he felt about Elinor. He did not waste his time in conjectures as to the possibility of any sudden rupture between herself and her uncle; he believed that both he and his daughter had been systematically deceived throughout, and that as she was nearly twenty-one, Dryden had thought it best to prepare her for the shock that must then come upon her. Markham forgot that she was not to attain her majority for two years longer.

But why had Elinor broken off her engagement? His first idea that her disinheritance was in some way connected with her marriage, was, he felt sure, a step towards finding out Dryden's secret, for after more than an hour's thought it had come back.

Stop—a glimmering shone through crevices of doubt—would it not come more distinctly?—yes, it was coming—it was coming. He held his head tightly grasped in both hands, his eyes closed, fearing, but not allowing himself to feel the fear of distraction, following along with rapid, stealthy dexterity the clue, the con-

viction now which he was resolved to put to the test.

People had often said that a mystery hung over Mr. Dryden; but this to Markham had hitherto meant no more than that he had made a loveless marriage, and had been bitterly disappointed to be left so soon a childless widower. Now he asked himself if there might not be a mystery after all, and if there might not have been a reason for Mrs. Dryden's undisguised unhappiness. Was Maurice Wentworth Dryden's unacknowledged son, and had his mother stood between the Squire and the love he owed his wife?

And as the idea grew into distinctness, Markham's passion became uncontrollable. He put a strong curb on himself to prevent its issue in words that might have been overheard in the outer office.

But it must cut the knot of the difficulty. He felt sure that Elinor's proud spirit would not stoop to such a marriage, and that Wentworth Dryden would not dare to leave Flairs solely to Maurice, if he were threatened with

exposure. Did the young man know his own position? And as Markham recalled the lofty tone in which Maurice had referred him to Mr. Dryden when he questioned his right to visit at his house, he decided in the negative. In an instant the power of keen, intense revenge on Wentworth Dryden showed itself to his greedy sight; he could have shouted for joy.

Here was the end of the clue he had been so long and patiently seeking for.

He started up and took his hat. He must see the boy at once—tell him the disgrace of his birth, and sow hatred between him and his father.

And then he hesitated. What did he know of this young Karse? He might rejoice in finding himself the son of a rich man on any terms. Perhaps in his secret heart Roland Markham thought that with no legitimate heir to bar his way to parental affection, it would be merely fastidious pride that would resent the wrong done to his mother. I do not say Mr. Markham would have felt this in his own case, but it is one of the wonderful parts of us human

beings, that although we always expect our neighbours to see facts and opinions through our medium, in scanning their motives and conduct we rarely use the same metre we employ for our own.

But Markham felt that this was a question that only personal inquiry could solve. He thought even if he found Maurice willing to bear the stain of illegitimacy, he might yet foment discord between him and his father. If he could persuade him to one open act of disobedience or rebellion to the narrow, iron rule which he considered the Squire exercised so unrighteously over all around him, he believed he should destroy Maurice's chances, and that if Elinor then strove hard she might secure the position she had so justly looked forward to as a right.

His first step must be to see Maurice, and learn from him how far he was cognisant of what was happening at Flairs, and then how much he really knew about himself. This was to be the master-stroke of his life, and no hurry or excitement must rob him of a fraction

of the clear-sightedness he knew he could practice when necessary.

He was very self-possessed and calm when he reached Mr. Brownlow's door ; but this sudden news of Maurice's journey, and the confirmation it gave to his suspicions, almost broke the strong rein he had laid on his impetuosity.

On his way to the house he had recalled his last interview with young Karse, and it seemed to him that he had some apology to offer for his behaviour ; but pride had never come in Markham's way in his life, when he had a special end to serve. Now, as he stood waiting for Maurice, he asked himself again why Wentworth Dryden had adopted Elinor, if he had never meant to make her his heiress, and the answer came clearly and distinctly.

"I have been robbed of my child ! that she may be brought up for the wife of his bastard," —he muttered a deep oath,—"to be used as a cat's paw, as a mere conveyance to transfer the property where he dared not have settled it legally. By Heavens ! I'll baulk him yet, let the cost be what it will."

CHAPTER VI.

A REVELATION.

THE door opened briskly, and Maurice came in.

Roland saw in an instant that he was neither forgiven nor forgotten ; but he saw too enough in the determination and frankness of the noble young face to give him hope that Maurice might prove, skilfully used, his best weapon against his father. For as he looked at him, he saw or fancied he saw a resemblance, not to Mr. Dryden himself, but to his own wife's father—the haughty old man who had so sternly refused forgiveness to his disobedient child. Only the dark eyes and brown hair were unlike those of

the fair-haired race whose pictures he remembered to have seen in his youth.

He stepped forward at once to meet Maurice, and with a smile that likened him strangely to Elinor, he made a full and hearty apology for his conduct at their last interview, taking the opportunity to lay the first stone of the barrier he intended to set up between him and his daughter. He said that he was worried beyond endurance when Mr. Karse called; that he also knew that another person was devoted to Elinor, and also, —here he paused and looked hard into the young man's eyes; to his utter surprise they expressed neither anger nor disappointment; so he went on, resolved to see if the indifference were real or feigned—and also to whom he had strong reasons for believing that his daughter was equally attached.

A strange quick look of inquiry shone out of Maurice's eyes, but not a shade of regret showed itself, either in voice or manner, as he frankly accepted Mr. Markham's excuses.

Here was one fear laid at rest. Here was one motive the less to incline the young man to

obedience. But he felt he must go on now to the other questions, for Maurice was evidently hurried—he had not even sat down.

“I have one or two things to ask you,” said Roland in a soft, subdued voice, “if you can spare the time to listen to them. I will not detain you long.”

Maurice was greedy of the last minutes thus robbed from Cecil; but he sat down in a sort of resigned sulkiness.

“You are on the point of starting for Flairs?”

“Yes;” and then half-ashamed of his moodiness, Maurice said carelessly, “Mr. Dryden wishes to see me at once.”

“Ah—a sudden summons—I see,” said Roland.

Something in the tone, or it might have been the consciousness that he had spoken of his private affairs to a person so strange to him as Roland Markham, brought back Maurice’s thoughts from their wandering. He looked at Markham, and then he saw that he had not come merely to make an apology for his rude-

ness, nor, as his tutor had told him, to ask him to undertake a commission to Elinor.

Roland felt too, that the game was fairly started; he had only to bring it down cautiously.

"I am going to put a question which, from me, must sound very uncalled for, but which, as it nearly touches your interests, I should be glad to have answered freely; have you any idea why you are sent for?"

He still spoke very softly, and Maurice felt a strange sensation of coming evil mingle with his dislike of this man; he hesitated a minute.

"No, only that I have not been at Flairs for some time, probably Mr. Dryden wishes to see more of me than he has as yet done."

"He has not seen much of you, then? I thought you told me you had always lived near him—I fancied even that you referred me to him—that he knew all about you."

His dreaminess had left Maurice now; he looked hard at Markham.

"You must excuse me, but unless you have any very important reason for all these questions I'm afraid I cannot enter into them."

Roland Markham bore the haughty look and tone with unruffled composure, but he had to keep a tight rein on his upper lip just then, as he thought how soon he could lower this youngster's pride.

"You can best tell me whether they are or are not pertinent questions, Mr. Karse; if you are thoroughly and entirely acquainted with your own family history, they are, of course, merely officious suggestions, but if you are not, then perhaps they are worth answering."

He looked so serious, so confident in his own knowledge, that Maurice felt thrilled with the strange, awful sensation we have all gone through on the brink of a revelation. For an instant his good angel whispered him to wait, to ask any questions he had to ask at Flairs, but then how little he understood the Squire; if this man really could tell him anything about himself, might not such knowledge help in the explanation he meant to ask for as soon as possible after his arrival. He was only twenty, and had seen little of the world.

"I possibly did tell you I had always lived at Flairs—I was brought up there, but not by Mr.

Dryden, though—" he hesitated now, for it seemed like a betrayal of Ben's confidence, and yet, if this man knew all about him, he must be aware of the relationship his old friend had revealed; still he hesitated—then strung up to determination by the expression he saw lurking in Markham's face, he said impatiently: "I think, instead of questioning me, if you mean well to me you had better be frank, and say exactly what you may have heard about me. I will set you the example, Mr. Markham. I know scarcely anything about myself. I have always been an orphan."

Just then Markham would have given his right hand for a calm, unmoved spirit; his blood coursed along with such lightning-like rapidity that the mad pulse-beats in his throat and temples confused thought.

Strive as he would he knew that a tell-tale gladness must be glittering in his eyes.

He looked down on the carpet; was it only from fear of exposing his own emotions? or was there lingering, somewhere in his heart, a reluctant pity for the honest manliness he was about to crush into shame?

"I will do as you ask," he said, "if you will answer this one question. Am I to understand that Mr. Dryden has taken sole charge of your education and bringing up?"

"Yes, I believe so."

With all his assumed self-command, and his assurance of its positive necessity, Markham could not restrain the peculiar whistling sound by which he expressed significant surprise; but it had more effect than he expected.

"I have answered you, Mr. Markham,"—the veins in Maurice's forehead swelled round and blue as his passion rose,—"and now I shall be glad if you will say plainly what you mean, without any more beating about the bush."

"I mean this,"—and as Maurice stood up, tall and defiant, his proud, young head thrown back, and his eyes fixed sternly on his companion, Markham rose too, feeling that the time for self-restraint was over, and that he might, at last, give his tongue freedom;—"that you must have been very blind not to have suspected, long ago, the secret of the Squire's interest in you—who but he could have had any interest in your life,

or in keeping your birth a mystery?" Then, seeing the utter bewilderment of Maurice's face, he went on, "I beg your pardon, I fancied you knew all, and were trying to deceive me, or I would have been less abrupt."

"Knew all what?" Maurice's voice was thick and hoarse; he grasped Markham's arm as if he feared he would escape him.

Roland was brave, physically, but he dared not trifle longer with passion like this.

"That Wentworth Dryden is your own father."

The hold on his arm was loosed, for Maurice's hand dropped nerveless to his side.

He stood there with widely-opened eyes and parted lips—striving to gather in the sense of the words whose full meaning did not at first reach him—he seemed to be waiting for some explanation, but Roland was resolved he should speak.

"I don't understand you;" Maurice said slowly, in a dreamy voice, that showed how far his consciousness was from the present.

"I wish to Heaven you did, then, Mr.

Karse;” Roland laid a pitying emphasis on the name that seemed to rouse his listener. “I told you a plain fact, which, in my opinion, you ought to have been told long ago; you say you have always been an orphan—I can’t tell you who your mother was—” the tiger-flash in the youth’s eyes warned him that he began to comprehend at last,—“but the Squire of Flairs is your father; although, of course, you have no right to the name of Dryden.”

Even to the last he kept his voice steady, lest any, the least, exultation should make his listener suspect the truth of what he had told him.

He stole a glance at him to see how he bore it. The blood had mounted to his temples, for even his forehead was crimsoned, but there was no visible agitation on his face.

He had fallen a little way back from Markham, when he let go his arm, but now he walked close up to him, and looked at him resolutely, in the eyes.

“You have come here, to-day, Mr. Markham, for the purpose of telling me that I am

Mr. Dryden's illegitimate son ;" his face turned deadly white as he said the words, "but I can scarcely make out why you have done so ; before you leave this room you will be kind enough to tell me your motive."

His manner was threatening, and Roland's anger rose.

"I have never submitted to Wentworth Dryden," he said, insolently, "and I'm not now going to submit to—you—but I meant to answer the question you have put of my own free will. I told you of the disgrace attached to your birth because I do not choose you to marry my daughter, and I do you the justice to think that such a stigma would silence your hopes about her ; now I will not detain you any longer."

He went out of the room, but Maurice scarcely noticed that he was gone ; he stood still, the waters of misery had closed over his head : sight—hearing—all outward sensations lay deadened under the cold, heavy pressure.

How long he stood there he never knew, or when he staggered into a chair. Mr. Brown-

low was absorbed in writing in the opposite room, as unconscious as Maurice of Markham's departure. It was time to start on his journey; but still the leaden pressure arresting thought either of the past, or for the future, continued. I said the waters of misery had closed over him, and there was the sightlessness and the gurgling noise in his ears and throat, which made the image real.

It was all darkness and bewilderment; and then he seemed suddenly to wake into the full agony of consciousness, when Cecil came up to him.

She stole into the room so gently that she did not disturb him. His back was towards the door, and she began laughingly to tease him for his delay, and told him her aunt said he had not a minute to lose if he wished to catch the train. But she saw his face now—it was death-like, and its fixed rigidity made it still more unlike life than even its ghastly whiteness.

In a moment she was kneeling beside him, clasping his cold hands in both hers, and pressing

them against her heart, as if she would quicken sensation by the rapidity of her own life-blood.

Her touch was electrical. Light shone into his eyes, the paleness faded off his face, and for a moment he returned the pressure of those soft, loving hands, so fondly striving to bring warmth into his own.

Then he flung them both from him, and looked into Cecil's face with such a horror of agony as he might have had after the commission of a crime.

But Cecil was not utterly terrified. She was shocked and frightened, for she feared that either some serious calamity had befallen Maurice, or that he was very ill; but he was her own, and nothing could evermore make her shrink from him. Before he could repulse her, she had thrown both arms round him, and looking up in his face, implored him to tell her what had happened.

She felt the strong frame against which she leaned quivering, and then came deep, heart-breaking sobs—sobs Cecil had never heard before—the helpless cry of a heart that as yet can-

not find vent in tears. She would not let him see her terror, yet more closely and fondly she wound her arms round him, pressing her cheeks against his, and soothing him with all the fond words that come to a woman's lips, when she tries to comfort.

For a moment he stood passive, not returning her embrace, but still suffering it: then writhing, as if stung to madness, he held her from him by both arms, and stood, looking down into her fair, upturned face.

The sweet eyes were glistening with fast coming tears, though the quivering nostrils and slightly compressed lips showed how bravely she was striving to repress them. There was a sombre passion, a remorseful sorrow in his face, that would have made any but a true woman shrink from him; but, fearless in her own truth, she thought only of him, and how she might best calm his grief.

For a moment neither spoke. Then Cecil tried to smile up in his face.

"Maurice, dear, dearest! tell me what this is—what is this sorrow that has come upon us?"

"Us!" he laid a bitter, mocking emphasis on the word. "You and I must separate, Cecil; there is no *us* now, and you must ask no question, for I have no answer—none"—he spoke sharply and sternly, he saw soft, pleading words forming on the rosy lips; "none that I dare give you, except that I am utterly base—utterly unworthy of your love!"

He released her arms while he spoke, and turned away.

Just as he reached the door, he looked at her, and Cecil spoke—she had a hard battle to keep back her tears, but she did keep them back.

"Maurice, dearest! come back! If you have ever loved me at all, will you answer me one question?"

He looked round wearily. He could not resist the soft, pleading words, though angry with himself for his own weakness. He had meant that to have been his last look at Cecil Brownlow, but the agony and choking tears in her voice would be listened to. She went on, trembling more and more.

“Are you parting from me for any fault of mine—or is it because you have left off loving me—or——”

But she could not finish. All the woman's pride she had tried to summon at this sudden rejection, deserted her. Till that moment she had not known what Maurice's love was to her, or how completely her soul had gone out of herself, to mingle with his. She could not see him now, for the hot, blinding tears streamed forth with sobs that almost stifled.

His stubborn face, had never melted at her words, it softened now, but Cecil could not see. Quick, burning shame, came with the vehement passion of grief, and the tears streamed through the hands that hid her eyes.

Then she felt his strong arms round her—felt herself held tightly—so tightly, to his heart, that its fierce beats were almost painful, while one hand pressed her head against his bosom.

He did not speak, but Cecil's dread was past. She might soothe him now—he loved her! He was hers still!

She felt hot, heavy drops, falling on her hair,

and she thanked God in her heart—for she had feared for Maurice's reason.

But when, as she felt his heart throbs lessen, she ventured gently to raise her head and look up, she saw still the same agony of sorrow.

Slowly, very slowly, helped more by her own quick divination than by his reluctant words, she drew from him Roland Markham's assertion; and then, when he suddenly felt she had divined it, Maurice again put her away from him, and told her they must be strangers—that she was too pure to share the fortunes and life of an outcast.

Cecil's eyes flashed brightly up into his, but he turned away, as if the cloud of shame which must be ever his portion, had already settled permanently between them.

"Shame on you, Maurice!" she said; "you would brand your own mother with disgrace, without decided proof! No, I will not believe this story. Your mother may have been wronged—too easily deceived—but never guilty!" She went up to him and took possession of one of his hands. "You shall not cast me from you,

Maurice ; even if this be true, do you think I could leave you ? Is there no Heaven for out-cast children, that you should hinder me from trying to make your life, while I can, a Heaven on Earth ?”

CHAPTER VII.

NORTHOVER ON GUARD.

WHEN Elinor had finished the letter in which she forbade Mr. Fisher's visit to Flairs, she felt puzzled how to dispose of it. The weather was stormy and wild, rain falling in streams, that made it impossible for her to leave the house without exciting an observation she did not care to tempt, and yet, unless she could meet the postman, she must place her letter in the open post-bag, and this hung all day long at the top of the back staircase, just outside her uncle's justice-room. For some time past she had been conscious that Northover watched her more

keenly than ever, and when she had placed her last letter to James in the bag, she had turned round and found the housekeeper suddenly coming up-stairs, although she had not heard a previous foot-fall. Was it possible that her uncle had set this woman as a spy upon her actions? No, this was impossible. It was more likely that Northover was curious to find out whether Mr. Dryden's unusual seclusion had been caused by any quarrel with his niece; Elinor had always feared the sly determination of this woman's eyes, and she shrank from putting herself in her power, just at what seemed the climax of her fate.

She walked up and down the room in restless anxiety, and then there came a light tap at the door, and Northover appeared.

By an instinct—which she repented when it was over—Elinor threw a loose sheet of blotting-paper over her unfinished letter. The hawk-like eyes looked keener than ever, and the lips screwed themselves so closely as almost to become invisible.

But Northover seemed merely to have come to

make one of her usual complaints against the flirtations of Elinor's maid, which she affirmed were disturbing the morality of the household, and were a sort of thing Flairs wasn't used to.

"Though what the men can see in her, is more than I can tell. It isn't that she's got any looks to spare—a little undersized scrap of a thing, as dark as a beetle, too, and it isn't, so far as I see, that she's much to say for herself, unless in her own outlandish talk,—it's her tricks that do it."

"What do you mean by tricks, Northover? You seem desperately hard on poor Françoise."

"There then, ma'am, I mean the way she's got of throwing up her eyes just at the right time, and clasping her hands together, and shrugging up her shoulders, and always having a smile ready for every one; it's quite irritating, just as if sober-minded, respectable folks can keep a stock of ready-made smiles always fit for use; and if you'll believe me, she takes in all the men by what they call her sweet ways—nasty tricks, I call 'em. The single men I've nothing to do with, though they are fools for their

pains, for she'll throw 'em away like a pan of skim-milk when she's tired of 'em, but the married ones are as bad. I believe now, if that girl held up her finger, they'd every man John of 'em run to London and back."

"Well then, I hope they will not," said Elinor calmly, "or there will be no one left to bring in dinner; but Northover, I cannot see how I can interfere with the men, and I ought not to be disturbed with stories about them. It seems to me that as housekeeper, all this devolves on you. As you bring no specific charge against Françoise, I must decline mixing myself up in the matter."

"Very well, ma'am; very well, Miss Dryden, of course if you countenance such conduct, things will be worse still, but my opinion is, you should dismiss her at once, if you wish to prevent scandal."

The housekeeper looked wrathful, and Elinor hesitated. She would have made some sacrifice to keep the peace with her, but she could not part with Françoise, the girl had such perfect taste, and was unusually clever and dex-

trous ; besides, she had posted too many letters to James Fisher to make it wise to send her away until Elinor's own future was quite safe. No, she must try and calm Northover.

“ Scandal, Northover? you take things up so strongly ; remember you were young once yourself, and liked attention, and all that sort of thing, no doubt ; be reasonable. Is it not fair to let the young ones have their turn too? I expect in your time you had plenty of admiration ?”

And having made the effort of paying what she considered an extravagant compliment to a plain, middle-aged woman, Elinor bent over her desk again.

If she had looked round, she might have felt more disquieted even than before the house-keeper's entrance.

Northover drew herself up, throwing her head back with a jerk that would have been uncomfortable to one unused to the habit. She looked very pale, and stood still a minute, then she seemed to decide that no answer was necessary, and left the room in silence.

Her veins must surely have been filled with quicksilver that day, she seemed to be perpetually fetching and carrying some imperceptible article between her room at the foot of the back staircase, and her bed-chamber at the top of its second flight, and each time—unless some one happened to be passing—she peeped into the letter-bag.

The stormy day, full of rain and wind, to which the lead coloured, swiftly moving clouds gave no hope of abatement, had caused, as it seemed, a general restlessness in the household of Flairs.

Mr. Dryden was in his writing-room, but he was no longer still and calm.

The morning's post had brought him a letter from Maurice, and after reading it, his agitation had been terrible. Anger and fear and keen disappointment distracted him by turns, but beyond all these was the gnawing remorse that by his own act he had forfeited that which he dreaded it was now too late to reclaim.

The letter was short and respectful, but its determination could not be mistaken. Maurice

thanked the Squire for all the benefits he had bestowed on him, but for the future he wished to make his own way in the world ; if what he had been told were true, the Squire would not be at a loss to understand his conduct : the only way of proving its falsehood would be at once to tell him who he really was, and the names of both his parents. But if it were true, he wished to be spared such a confirmation of disgrace, only he must know if the name of Karse were really his own.

At first it seemed to Mr. Dryden that the secret he had kept at the cost of his life's happiness, had been betrayed—but by whom? Had he talked in his sleep? Had his papers been ransacked? This was only the first hurried questioning of surprise; he knew that both were impossible means of betrayal in a man of his peculiarly cautious habits, his only confidant had been the picture of his dead wife, as he read the letter again, its meaning struck him from a new point of view: Maurice had been told some falsehood, or he could not have still supposed his name to be Karse.

Some one had been at work, and why should he call the boy foolish and proud? Was not the last fatal gift his right by inheritance?

Gradually, as anger and disappointment softened and gave place to thought, he began to search back for a clue to this change in Maurice. It came with the suddenness of light.

Roland Markham was the only person who would take the trouble to mar his plans. He had proved himself what the Squire had always suspected him to be—a cunning, unscrupulous liar.

And yet, what motive could have prompted him? The Squire had heard from Mr. Brownlow of his pupil's acquaintance with the Markham family; and much as he disliked his brother-in-law, he had thought it well for Elinor and Maurice to have the opportunity of meeting. Although for some years past he had planned their union, he had purposely avoided all mention of Maurice to his niece; till the discovery of her debts, and her want of truth showed him how little hold he possessed on her confidence, he had not thought of hurrying

matters ; but when that came it had seemed to him wiser to ascertain at once if his plan for the disposal of Flairs could be carried out, and to make himself sure of Elinor's obedience for the future.

But Roland Markham knew nothing of all this. The Squire had forbidden Elinor to write to her father until all was settled between herself and Maurice ; and he could not bear to doubt her after their last interview in the writing-room—even supposing that Markham kept a spy among the household, who had in some way gleaned the substance of what was happening—he could not see his motive for interference. Surely the inheritance of Flairs was what he coveted most for his daughter.

But he had no time to lose in reflection. His own tenure of life was most uncertain.

Maurice must be master of Flairs, and the only way of securing this quietly and without arousing an inquiry which would have disturbed the Squire's pride was his marriage with Elinor. And why should not their marriage—at any rate their betrothal—take place at once ? Only a

few days ago, he had himself thought Elinor full of charm and fascination ; and what had she done to forfeit his good opinion ? She had been foolish and extravagant, but then (so his wishes argued) all women were the first and perhaps the last also, if they had spirit and opportunity. He had told her once that she should always remain at Flairs, if she married to please him and did not entangle herself in any love affairs. Her recent submission to his wishes proved her obedience in this respect. She had proved herself trustworthy on this one point, and he was bound to keep his word towards her.

He did not anticipate any opposition on Maurice's part to this union. There had been something in Elinor's manner that indicated a consciousness of the youth's admiration.

He must write to him at once and require his immediate presence.

This was what he wrote :—

“ MAURICE,—You have no right to the name of Karse. Your true and lawful name is Dryden. You speak of disgrace ; there

can be none attached to you, or to your birth. I fear you have listened to some one who has tried to sow discord between me and you. You owe me no thanks. I had much reparation to make to the son both of your father and your mother; but if you think you owe me anything give me this one proof—return at once to Flairs, and ask me face to face the questions you want solved, and if I can I will answer them. It is not only for this that I require your immediate presence; you can, by coming speedily, render me the greatest service one man can render another—rest from such anxiety as I pray you may never know.”

The letter was finished and despatched. It was impossible Maurice could arrive till next day; but it seemed to Mr. Dryden that he must fill up the intervening time. His excitement was beyond any control he could exercise; he had calmed it by almost unnatural strength while he wrote the letter; but now it returned, mastering thought and shutting out all present feelings in the doubtful future, for he could not

disguise from himself that the issue of to-morrow was doubtful—that unless he could preserve his secret, Maurice would be totally estranged. He clung to the hope of preserving it with the tenacity of a drowning creature. He had only to be firm and observant, and he should soon discover what had roused the youth's suspicions. Firm ! Sometimes in this long tedious day the Squire asked himself seriously if his senses were leaving him ; his mind seemed as agitated, as restless as that of an impulsive girl.

He sent for Northover.

Yes—she had executed the orders he had given her, and had seen that the rooms in the North Gallery, next the White Bedchamber, were duly prepared for the visitor he expected.

“ For Mr. Fisher ? ”—The sharp, inquisitive eyes expressed that she ought to have been told the name of anything so rare as a guest at Flairs.

Mr. Dryden looked up in astonishment. All this time he had shrunk from giving utterance to the name of his expected guest, and yet he must say it sooner or later.

“ For Mr. Dryden.”

Northover started in such surprise, that he went on—"A young relative of mine, who will probably stay here for some weeks."

And then the Squire took up a newspaper. He considered that the housekeeper had exceeded her province. She stood still a moment longer. Fisher was certainly the name on Miss Dryden's letters ; after spending so much time and trouble and sleepless vigilance to confirm her suspicions—for she was convinced now that Elinor was carrying on a clandestine correspondence—must she give up this opportunity of exposing it all to the Squire ?

While she hesitated he looked up.

There was the old stern, reserved look in his eyes she had missed since Sir Stuart died ; it frightened her almost as much as if she had met a ghost in the North Gallery, and she left the writing-room without a word.

"Good gracious ! patience," she said to herself as she hurried to her own sanctum, "I'd as lief have walked up to a cannon as have told him I'd meddled with the letter-bag. Folks say the devil's in old Sir Fulk's eyes in the picture ;

but I should say he had a fancy for changing his lodgings. I'm positive, no Christian gentleman ever looked as the Squire did just now, without help from below."

CHAPTER VIII.

REJECTED.

MAURICE walked quickly across the park, feeling much like a man suddenly awakened from sleep. But for the bright, brief episode of Cecil's love—life might have been a dream since the last time he visited Flairs. He had come, then, full of the chafing soreness of dependence, his mind bent on discovering the secret of his birth, and also on making his own unaided way in the world. He had gone back to London proud and happy, relieved even from the feeling of dependence on a stranger. Since then he had known greater misery and more intense joy than he thought earth held for him, and now what

were his feelings ? By a strange fatality there seemed a wonderful sameness in his present anticipations to those with which he left Ben's cottage, with one marked difference. If anything had been wanting to teach him the contrast between his feelings for Elinor and his love for Cecil, he would have found it now. Cecil had become so all and everything to him of present and future, that though to please her he had obeyed Mr. Dryden and had accepted the truth of his written assertions, he was thinking far more of her sweet face and her tender parting words than of unravelling the mystery of his birth ; while before he had been so eager to prove himself Elinor's equal, that her image had been obscured by the tumult of joyful pride Ben's story had evoked. And Ben, dear Ben, it seemed so hard that he should not see him.

Still, when his mind wandered back to the Squire's letter, his heart swelled with deep, quiet thankfulness. It had been such unutterable relief to think of his mother without shame, for even Cecil scarcely knew how the cruel doubt had scorched the freshness of his

faith in women. He had loved this unknown mother with true boy's love, with a heart and soul worship, that pictured her an ideal of purity and gentle beauty. He had suffered far more for her shame than for his own birth, so deeply and keenly, that at first it had been almost impossible to receive the assurance of his error. If Cecil had not pleaded so urgently for the Squire's truth and honour, he would have been hard to convince. Now, spite of the still remaining mystery, he thanked God earnestly for this fresh blessing, and asked himself why he should have so much granted him at once. It seemed, then, as if Cecil's love ought to have sufficed for all else.

For the first time in his life he stood at the hall entrance of Flairs. He rang, but the broad, low-browed door was open, and he passed into the hall. His eyes glanced from one wall to the other, covered with strange antique weapons, some of which had been stoutly wielded at Crecy and Poitiers; and then on that stalwart knight, who with his charger in full steel panoply, represented the Dryden who fought at

Agincourt. Ben had made the legends of the Drydens familiar to Maurice before his first meeting with Elinor. The young man's heart swelled now with blameless exultation. They were his ancestors—the blood that ran in his veins had been shed gloriously, and always with honour. He looked reverently again at the time-honoured relics, and vowed that if he lived he would add fresh lustre to the name of Dryden.

Just as he reached the foot of the broad staircase, dimly lighted by the stained glass window full of heraldic emblems, Mr. Tomkins appeared from one of the side doors, and addressing Maurice as Mr. Dryden, said the Squire would expect him in his writing-room when he had taken some refreshment.

The man's quiet solemnity, the noiseless stairs, with their deep, soft carpeting and sombre atmosphere, oppressed Maurice. He said he would prefer being at once shown to the writing-room.

But Mr. Tomkins knew his routine of duty, and was not going to depart from it.

He merely bowed suavely, and conducted the

visitor to the dining-room, condescending to wait on him himself, with the same oppressive, noiseless, voiceless seriousness.

Finally, when he saw that hospitality was satisfied, he offered to shew the way to the writing-room.

Maurice's thoughts strayed on before him to its occupant. By some strange perversity he seemed to have escaped from the influence of Cecil's pleading, and to think of the Squire as the hard, loveless tyrant who had so stubbornly rejected his boyish worship. If he could have seen Mr. Dryden in these hours of anxious waiting, his heart must have softened.

The Squire had passed nearly the whole night in deep, earnest self-communion. When we feel ourselves on the threshold of some momentous change in life, we strip off flimsy disguises and worldly garments of wisdom, and pass through it in the nakedness of truth.

He had not again visited the picture—he dared not, but still his wife's sweet face, her sad, haunting eyes were before him, urging him to do what he had resolved and laboured that he

might not do. His mind had been so overtaxed lately by the constant struggle he had no power to quell, and by the engrossing interest the discovery of Elinor's deceit had awakened in her, that it was scarcely strange he had not remarked that Maurice's letter was dated London, although he had written to him supposing him to be still absent with his tutor.

Now he sat counting the moments, for he was aware that his son had arrived. The excitement of the previous day was mastered, but it had left traces in his increased paleness and rigidity of features. At last he had conquered, he had stifled that mournful pleading; he would keep his secret while he lived. Afterwards—well, afterwards was provided for. Would the sad eyes rest now?

There was a sound of footsteps in the stone passage. Spite of the matting outside, and the curtained door within, the Squire heard them, and he rose up to receive his visitor.

He forced a smile to his lips as Maurice entered, but it faded away in the anxious, penetrating gaze with which he strove to read the young man's feelings. There was a simple

firmness about him that baffled scrutiny ; to outward appearance, at least, there was no trace of agitation or timidity.

A few questions and answers about Mr. Brownlow and his journey, and then came a pause.

They sate on either side of the fireplace, and though they seemed to shrink from looking each other full in the face, both had taken note of the change since their last meeting. It seemed to Maurice that the Squire had grown much older ; his hair had whitened, and his face was thinner and more colourless ; and Mr. Dryden meanwhile was thinking how nobly his own manly race would be perpetuated by so well-developed a type of English strength and beauty.

But the silence was lasting too long.

"Maurice," he said, and then for the first time his listener's countenance became troubled, "you have some reason to be discontented with me,—for my—my early harshness towards you, and also for having brought you up in ignorance of your birth."

His words came with much effort, and he stopped and looked down on the carpet.

Maurice spoke eagerly—

"No, sir, not the first; I only require to know the names of my parents;" he longed to add specially his mother's name, but an instinctive feeling of reverence kept him back.

A look of deep sadness—so solemn that it thrilled through the young man's heart—came into the Squire's face.

"That to me is the painful part, Maurice, of what I have to do; but first let me proceed as I began. My excuse for all I spoke of just now is this—till I sent you to Mr. Brownlow, I believed you to be illegitimate,"—Maurice started, and the colour rushed to his temples almost as it had done when Roland Markham had made the same assertion,—“and I therefore considered you had no right either to the name or breeding of a Dryden. It was a grievous mistake, and perhaps it is offering you some reparation to say that I have suffered grievously for having committed it. Your father you never knew—your mother did not long survive your birth. Both, in my eyes then, had erred so deeply, that if the death of the person in whose charge you were placed, had not left you

friendless, I believe I should not have brought you to Flairs. When I discovered my mistake, it seemed to me better that you should not assume your own name until education had in some way repaired the wrong unintentionally done you. I think this is accomplished, and that you are quite worthy now of the name of Dryden."

Mr. Dryden had paused several times in saying what he had evidently studied and prepared beforehand, and Maurice felt distrustful and dissatisfied. He tried to interrupt, and to ask again the name of his parents, but the Squire stretched out his hand to entreat patience.

"You may have heard from Ben that when I married I cut off the entailed succession to this property, so that your being a Dryden, and my nearest male relative, gives you no right to its inheritance; but, Maurice, I have decided on making you partly my heir—with one condition only attached, a condition which I believe you will find a hard one."

Maurice was greatly moved—he had never anticipated more from the Squire's bounty than

perhaps the help his name and influence might afford on his first outset in life, but before his gratitude could find any words the remembrance of Elinor overcame him.

"I should not have known how to thank you for so much goodness," he said, "but I cannot fulfil your wishes, Mr. Dryden, if you are putting me in the place of your niece,—of Elinor."

There was a hesitation, almost an awkwardness, about these words that confirmed the suspicions Elinor had excited in her uncle, in their recent mention of Maurice, respecting his love for herself.

The Squire smiled.

"I had never promised Flairs unconditionally to Elinor," he said, "but still I am not going to rob her of any just expectations she may have formed."

"Mr. Markham told me," said Maurice, slowly, for he felt sure now that he was not the son of Wentworth Dryden, and he began to see that the man who had deceived him on one point might equally deceive on another;

“that you had promised to make his daughter heiress of Flairs, on condition she was given up to you to educate and adopt as your own.”

The smile died from the Squire's face, and he flushed deeply; he evidently had to struggle hard with his anger before he spoke again.

“Roland Markham is, and always was, an unprincipled man, who would never scruple to say what best suited his own purposes. I promised Elinor that she should remain at Flairs if she married to please me, but her father knew nothing of this. Was it Mr. Markham who tried to poison your mind against me before you wrote your last letter—have you any objection to repeat what he told you?”

There was an anguish of eagerness in the Squire's eyes as he asked this; it troubled Maurice.

“You are right, sir, in supposing it to have been Mr. Markham, but I would rather not tell you what he said. I see now that it was false, but it would be very painful to me to say what it really was.”

The Squire was disappointed; he felt bitterly

that he could not win Maurice's confidence, and till he had it he shrank from what he still had to say. But it must be said sooner or later—better volunteer it than yield it on compulsion.

“You have asked me one very painful question, Maurice; I hoped that as your parents were always unknown to you, you would have considered me as at least an adopted father.” He stopped, and looked almost imploringly at the firm, young face before him—for once he seemed to recognise the power of an equal will. “If you knew at what cost I should unfold their sad history, you would spare me; when I am dead, you shall know all, will not that content you? you may not have very long to wait.”

Maurice rose up from his seat—his face was full of trouble—dark suspicions and anxiety took place of the calm self-reliance that had been there.

“I cannot understand you, Mr. Dryden,” he said, passionately; “if my silence on this is the condition annexed to the inheritance of Flairs, then I must resign it altogether.”

But the deep sorrow in the pale, care-worn face touched him with a stronger power than words. Strive as he would against it, the old fascination he had conquered in youth was upon Maurice now, and was mastering his resolve to know what common sense told him he ought, both by right and duty, to ascertain.

"I had hoped differently;" the Squire's voice was broken by some repressed current of feeling: "I hoped when you were assured that you were born in lawful wedlock, that I myself witnessed your parents' marriage, you would have been satisfied; and Maurice, you must be satisfied so far, till certain circumstances are fulfilled—I cannot tell you what you ask; then if you still urge it, I will tell you all you seek to know, at the cost of my own peace—and, it may be, of yours also. Are you content?"

Maurice did not look so.

"But these circumstances—if their fulfilment depends on me—why not explain them to me, at once?"

"I propose to do so;" the Squire smiled

slightly at the young man's impatience, "but you are not the only person concerned. I am now going to explain to you the condition on which I propose to make you my heir."

Without another word he got up and went out of the room.

Maurice stood still, discontented with Mr. Dryden, and more so with himself. Then the only question he had come down to Flairs to solve was to remain unanswered—a mystery; and the reason given was totally inadequate, in his eyes, to the importance of the thing refused, a mere sentimental regard for the Squire's feelings; what was there about this man? he had bewitched Cecil, and he believed that he exercised some strange, irresistible power over himself. Maurice hated mysteries, with all the open-heartedness of youth—he had no dark corners in his heart as yet, into which the sun must not shine, and over which memory felt eased and thankful to let cobwebs accumulate. It was ridiculous and incomprehensible that so simple a request should be denied him; he should make another appeal to the Squire,

and find out, at any rate, how long these circumstances would take to fulfil. One sentence had given him great relief and peace of mind—Mr. Dryden had been a witness to the marriage between his father and his mother. He had not known, till he heard this, how much he still doubted.

He must tell the Squire at once his own love for Cecil Brownlow, and her promise to become his wife; but to this he did not anticipate objection, only it was due, both to Cecil and to Mr. Dryden, to mention it without delay.

He was picturing her delight when she learned that he was to become the Squire's adopted son; when Mr. Dryden came back he held the door open for some one to pass in, and Elinor entered.

She never looked more charming, as she went forward to greet Maurice a blush rose on her cheek, and a soft, timid look came into the brightness of her beautiful eyes.

He had forgotten her presence at Flairs, and he felt very awkward and ill at ease. Again

the dream-like feeling returned, and it seemed to him to be still a dream, when the Squire, with the courtly grace he knew so well how to assume, presented Maurice to Elinor as the fair condition he had spoken of, and told them both, that though such an event as their marriage might for the present be only a future thought, still his wish was to see them acknowledged and affianced lovers. Still the dream continued its night-mare like pressure. The touch of the Squire's cold fingers, as he took his hand to join it to Elinor's, awakened him. He drew it quickly away, just as Elinor had yielded hers unresistingly to be placed within it.

The Squire's eyes literally blazed with sudden anger. Elinor stood haughty and defiant, the deep red which had suffused her whole face fading suddenly away to whiteness.

Maurice spoke at once.

"You have taken me by surprise, sir. If you had waited five minutes longer, I should have told you what must have prevented this."

The Squire's voice came with a hoarse, strange sound.

"Nothing can, or shall prevent it." And then he stopped, although those stern, strong words seemed to have forced an utterance.

They all three stood silent for some moments. The Squire's words had roused the determined dumb pride hidden in Maurice's nature; but Elinor's was stung to madness.

Her uncle had told her that Maurice was a Dryden—in every way her equal; but what of that? Any man should have—until now, Elinor would have said must have—considered himself honoured by the offer of her hand; but this boy, whom she remembered only as an inferior, on whom she had heaped obligations that must make him her inferior for ever—a low-bred boor, that he should dare thus to insult her in her uncle's very presence!

Her eyes flashed brightly, and she looked from one to the other. As she did so, and saw the swelling pride in the face of each, a strange, hitherto unmarked resemblance struck her. In mien, in expression, in gesture, in some features, even, they were wonderfully alike; and as his eyes looked fearlessly into the Squire's, Elinor

saw, with a wonder that almost hushed her passion, the secret of the strange influence Maurice's face had from the first exercised over her. But for his liquid, dark eyes, he was the counterpart of Hubert Dryden—the idol of her girlish worship.

But all this was a momentary conviction. Pressing her hands tightly together, she addressed Mr. Dryden :—

“Uncle, you will excuse me if I refuse to prolong this interview. If I had not thought your presence a protection against insult, I should not have consented to it at all.”

The hard scorn with which her words were spoken would possibly have cured Maurice of any wish to prosecute his suit, even if Cecil had not stood in the way. But he flushed deeply, as if only just aware of the indignity he had offered her.

“I beg *your* pardon, Miss Dryden,” he said, frankly, turning his back completely on the Squire ; “for what may seem want of courtesy, but it seemed best for both of us to speak out.

You must forgive my hasty manner. I was taken completely by surprise."

Without a word or a look, only showing that she heard his words by keeping still as a statue in erect haughtiness, she listened ; and when he left off speaking, passed on to the door, her form seeming to gain in amplitude as she swept slowly by.

Maurice sprang forward and held the door. He would willingly have followed her and insisted on her forgiveness. After all he had heard both from her father and from Cecil, he thought she ought to grant it. But his anger was deeply roused against Mr. Dryden, for making him the victim of so foolish and ill-judged a surprise ; he could not leave him till he had compelled some explanation. Elinor would not have listened then ; the sense of his words had not pierced through the raging tumult of her pride and her anger.

Maurice walked back to the Squire.

"When you left me just now"—he spoke with far less courtesy than he had used at first—"I was going to tell you, Mr. Dryden, that I

am no longer free—even if I acknowledged your right to give me away to any one you may choose for me—and I absolutely deny this—Cecil Brownlow has promised to be my wife, as soon as I can make a home for her.”

“Cecil!”—It was spoken with a bitterness of sorrow that mastered the stormy anger for a while. Mr. Dryden stood gazing at the young man so sadly, that Maurice had no heart to proceed with his reproaches. But suddenly a new hope dawned, and the Squire’s sunken eyes lit up with animation and energy.—“It cannot be, Maurice. I have no fault to find with Cecil. She is all that I could have wished for your wife; but I knew it could not be, and so I tried to keep you apart. Remember, you are a Dryden, and with us family honour weighs above every mere feeling. You can have seen but little of each other, and you must forget that little. I had decided years ago, that your marriage with Elinor would be the only way of reconciling your conflicting claims. I cannot set aside these well-considered reasons in a moment. Elinor is angry now, and justly”—and here the

Squire's own anger rallied ; " for I must tell you, Maurice, that I can scarcely excuse your conduct. But time will bring her round—only understand this, and it will save discord between us,—you shall not be hurried or coerced, but you can marry no one but Elinor."

Then Maurice's indignation found words. He told the Squire that he was cancelling all past benefits by his present tyranny—that he should gladly renounce kinship with a family who could break faith to those they loved in obedience to pride of race—that if his marriage with Elinor were the condition of his inheritance, he could never fulfil it, and Mr. Dryden must seek another heir.

He spoke eagerly and earnestly ; there was manliness as well as decision in his refusal. But Mr. Dryden was too much bent on carrying out his purpose to be touched by anything but compliance.

He assailed him with reproaches, but Maurice looked only more determined. Then the Squire tried entreaty, and showed him the selfishness there would be in linking Cecil's life to such an up-hill lot as his own must prove.

Maurice made no sign of relenting, till the Squire at last insisted on his obedience in this matter.

Then his eyes brightened, and his lips parted to answer.

“Stay, I have not quite ended.”—The Squire’s agitation had grown into a passionate vehemence, strangely unnatural to his habitual calm. “You have never known a father, Maurice—have I not tried to be one to you? I am the head of your house—your nearest male relative. This gives me, surely, a claim on your obedience. You are young, and, from circumstances, more inexperienced than your age. I give you the benefit of my life’s wisdom, when I warn you not to let mere inclination—a passion of a few days’ growth—decide your fate. I tell you, Maurice, you may be laying the foundation-stones of a perpetual remorse. But why do I stay to reason? Maurice, I command your obedience. Write to Cecil at once, or I will do so. She will yield uncomplainingly to my wishes; and then, in some months longer, if you wish it, when change of scene and distance will have

cured you of this fancied love, you will return to Elinor, and wonder how you ever thought of any one else."

"I must speak, Mr. Dryden"—Maurice had grown chafed and restless under the enforced silence.—"I have loved Elinor, or, at least, deceived myself into thinking that the mere excitement of passion was love; but when I saw Cecil again, I knew that I had loved her first, and truly; and now, nothing—not any lapse of years, could change my affection. It may sound a weak confession, but I believe I must love her, even if she ceased to love me. I beg of you, sir, to listen to me a minute longer. I cannot acknowledge that you have any claim to my obedience. I shall always owe you duty and gratitude, but these cannot control my will, or my affections. I should be more sorry to disappoint your expectations, if I thought by doing so I had prevented what might possibly have happened; but I cannot think this. Miss Dryden is angry now, but in her heart she rejoices at my refusal."

The Squire was too overwrought to notice

this allusion to Elinor. The marriage must be. Why should he listen to the opposition of a boy of twenty ?

“ You have had no time for thought, Maurice ; we will not continue the subject now, but by to-morrow I hope you will think differently. I find I was mistaken in supposing that you were attached to Elinor, for I had no intention of taking you by surprise. I have made up my mind that you shall inherit Flairs, and that you shall do this as the husband of Elinor, and surely you will not cross my will ? If you knew how gladly in acknowledging you as my heir I would admit you to the full privileges of a son, I think you would be less stubborn ; now let us part for the present.”

He pointed to the door, for his agitation warned him not to prolong this scene, lest he might say what he had decided was best kept silent, but Maurice did not obey the mute sign, he stood facing the Squire, he was trying to curb his pride ; after all he owed much to this hard obstinate man, and he did not want his last words to be spoken angrily.

"If I leave you now, Mr. Dryden, it will be for the last time, for I feel you will not forgive what you call my disobedience. I cannot give up Cecil. I would do much to retain your good opinion ; as to Flairs, that is another matter, I have never expected it, and so I am not disappointed, but I wish with all my heart you would see this more reasonably, and then, I think you must confess, I have a right to choose my own wife. Even if I did not love Cecil, I could not be happy with Elinor." He stopped and looked at the Squire : still the same hard resolved mouth and frowning eyes. "Will you not let me part friends with you, sir ? I have never thanked you perhaps enough, for all you have done, but it is not want of memory for your benefits that has decided me now. I cannot give up Cecil, neither can I acknowledge your claim to the obedience you could scarcely expect from your own child."

There was almost tenderness in the wistful look he gave, as he slowly passed Mr. Dryden on his way to the door.

A trembling like that of ague passed through

the frame of the tall, grey-haired man, trying, as he stood there, to harden himself against this last appeal to his better feelings. It was one of the throes of nature, starved, denied of her rights, and agonised into motion by seeing the seal about to be set on their restoration.

Mr. Dryden's lips moved, but no sound came from them. Maurice had reached the door, and it seemed to the unhappy man that he could not prevent his departure.

Maurice turned round once more.

"Will you at least say good-bye?"

Then the weight lifted, and the Squire's words came rushing forth with a fiery vehemence that awed his listener as much as their sense did.

"No, ungrateful, rebellious boy; as a *son* you must fulfil my bidding, and must give up your own headstrong will; stay and learn what I had meant you to know only at my death;—you are indeed my own son!"

Both men stood speechless after Mr. Dryden's last words, and then like lightning the conviction flashed on Maurice that Roland Markham had spoken the truth.

A deep shame and a strong indignation against the man who called himself his father, came upon him, overcoming all surprise.

"Then if this be true,"—he avoided the Squire's eyes by an instinct he could not as yet understand,—“by what right did you say my name was Dryden?”

At first the Squire seemed bewildered, his anger had exhausted itself in the effort of confession; he looked earnestly at his son, but when he saw his flushed cheek, and his evident avoidance of his own gaze, he guessed his thoughts.

“By the right of truth,”—he spoke very slowly and sadly, he wished to force conviction into the youth's mind, and he began to see this might be difficult,—“you are my own child, Maurice, and your mother was my lawful wife.”

And then he looked again at his son, as if at least expecting some slight acknowledgment of his new-found claims.

But none came. The story was to Maurice utterly wild and incredible. Why had it been delayed till now? He stood silent, lost in meditation, for a moment he once glanced up

to see if there were any signs of mental disturbance in Mr. Dryden, his assertion sounded more like the creation of a madman than sober sense, but he did not raise his eyes again. He had met a look almost imploring, so full of entreaty, that it shook his conviction far more than the Squire's words had succeeded in doing. Should he follow his original plan of departure in utter disbelief of what sounded so incredible? or should he require Mr. Dryden to confirm his assertion by proofs?

The Squire's impatience left him no time to decide.

The irrevocable step against which he had all his life struggled, had seemingly changed his nature, or perhaps the tide of freed emotion, so long pent in and repressed, now that the flood-gates were lifted, rose so high as to bear before it and obliterate all the safety marks of self-control and self-respect and cautious firmness, which had been his special gifts. Just now he was—mentally considered—by far the youngest, most impulsive man of the two.

"Maurice, I see you doubt me," he spoke

with eager rapidity, "but I can prove what I have said. I can prove to you and to the whole world, if you require it, the truth of this assertion, but I would rather prove it only to you, Maurice, and perhaps when you have satisfied yourself, you will agree with my silence towards others."

Again the same troubled look clouded the young man's eyes. What need for this mystery if all were fair and upright? but he felt compelled to speak.

"I beg your pardon, sir, if I seem unnatural and hard of belief, but I cannot help it, it is all so new and strange, that I cannot in any way realise it."

There was a look of exceeding bitterness in the father's face. Let no one suppose that Mr. Dryden had pictured a romantic scene between himself and his long denied son; he was too devoid of imagination to have indulged in any such folly, but still he saw his only child before him at last, fairly and freely claimed, and he yearned with the strange hunger of nature for some token, some acknowledgment, however

mute, of the affection he had so long put away from him.

He bowed his head, submitting to what was now inevitable. If Roland Markham could have seen the deep humiliation of that bent head, the tearless agony in those sunken eyes, he might have felt amply revenged in the punishment of the man, who had with his own hand carved out the doom of those moments.

Suddenly Maurice looked up. As he looked his face softened, and a look of doubt came into his eyes, but he made no step forward.

"I do not blame you," his father said. "In your distrust now, I am reaping the reward of my own—but delay is only giving us both pain. I will lay before you the proofs I spoke of, at once."

He brought from his justice-room the carefully sealed-up packet, and placed it on the table, before Maurice had succeeded in regaining the mastery over himself; he tried to speak, but his father stopped him.

"Not now, not till you know how far you have been sinned against, and my justification;

if you find it impossible to excuse what is set down in this packet, you can best tell me so in writing, but,"—he found it hard to go on, his voice shook so painfully,—“if on the contrary you can forgive your own father, then come and tell me so—you will find me here.”

He raised the curtain over the library door while he was yet speaking, as if he were afraid Maurice would try to prevent his going.

But the young man's eyes were fastened on the packet before him, on which were written the words “To be read only after my death;” he did not even look round.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SEALED PACKET.

"To my Son, Maurice Wentworth Dryden.

"WHEN you read these pages, Maurice, I shall be beyond the reach of your reproaches, and of any just anger you may feel at the long denial of the rights of your birth and position. Reflection will in time show you that ever since I have really considered you my own son, I have tried, so far as was possible, to repair this wrong. My silence has hitherto prevented the faintest shadow from resting on your mother's name. God knows, and to Him I leave the decision of right and wrong between us,

that it is for her sake, and hers alone, that I have denied myself the solace and pride of owning you before the world. I have studied your character far more deeply than you imagine, and I have always felt hopeless that any private recognition would satisfy a nature so like my own. I did not feel sure that the knowledge of the truth might not cause an utter separation between us. If I have erred in this past your forgiveness, I must trust to God only. He knows that I have borne this as my earthly punishment as resolutely as I could. One more word before I begin this sad story. It is told you as a sacred duty, but it is also told you as a warning—a warning, remember, from the grave—never to suffer jealousy or suspicion to be even listened to, if you would not let their poisonous tongues lick every drop of happiness from your life.

“In the White Bedchamber, in the North Gallery at Flairs, her bedchamber once, you will find your mother's picture. You may judge what she seemed to me six months before that picture was painted.

"I had been spending some months abroad, and in my travels met for a few days with a very dear collega friend of mine, Stuart Palmer. But I wished to prolong my stay in Rome, while he pushed on to Naples, where he expected to meet friends. He did not tell me the names of these friends, and I, knowing him to be of a restless, roving nature, thought he had tired of Rome, and left me only for the sake of variety. He was Mr. Palmer then, a younger brother with a slender income and no expectations, his brother being on the point of marriage. Do not pass over this part of my story as irrelevant; you will find by-and-bye that it nearly concerns you.

"I lingered in Rome some time after Palmer had left it, and after visiting all the principal cities of Northern Italy, I went back to it again before my departure for England. I had been abroad for more than a year, and my absence was greatly complained against.

"On the first evening of my return to Rome I met your mother. It was summer-time, and this had determined me on not deferring my

journey. I had gone into the gardens of the French Academy in the evening, for the day had been intolerably hot, and sate down to rest on one of the benches. I had sate there a long time, the gardens were almost deserted, when I heard voices approaching. A group of three persons came slowly towards me, and one stepped out from the rest and called me by my name. He was an old college friend whom I had never greatly liked, and my first feeling was that of annoyance at having met him; but away from home, an English face was welcome, and when he asked me to join his party, I did so willingly.

"When you have looked on your mother's picture you will in some measure realise my feelings. I was presented to her and to her mother, but I seemed bewildered. Her mother, Mrs. Butler, talked to me, but I hardly knew what I answered. Even now the strange, magical fascination of that evening is as fresh as though it had lately happened.

"I tell you all this as my justification, Maurice, for a blindness that may otherwise seem

inexcusable. Remember, too, that I had never really loved before, that my passions were in the full vigour of their manhood; and lastly, remember the almost more than earthly beauty that seemed ready to be mine for the asking.

“Looking back on it all at this distance of time, it seems marvellous how fast our intimacy grew, though I have since thought it was purposely hurried on. We drove together on the Corso, and in the evening, by moonlight, beyond the city. Each day I grew more and more determined that Lettice must be my wife. She was very bright and happy with me, till my manner shewed her the state of my feelings. Then she became shy and reserved, and seemed to avoid me.

“Her father, Colonel Butler, a fine old Irishman, was at times almost imbecile from exposure to the sun in India. Her mother, who must once have been nearly as beautiful as her daughter, was the governing principle in the family,—not obtrusively so—she seemed to me, till my marriage, one of the gentlest and

sweetest of women, with a few scrupulous notions of propriety, which at times irritated me, but still most amiable. My only cause of complaint was the impossibility of seeing Lettice alone, even for an instant. I longed to know if her shyness, which now grew daily, would continue when she was unrestrained by her mother's presence.

"But I must hurry over this beginning. I asked Mrs. Butler if she could explain her daughter's seeming dislike to me. May God forgive me if I wrong her, but without saying it in plain words, she made me feel that what I had taken for aversion was the modest shyness of first love. This, of course, drew from me what only Lettice's coldness had delayed, a declaration of my own desire to marry her daughter.

"Mrs. Butler hesitated at first on account of Lettice's age—she was not quite seventeen; but as doubt naturally only increased my eagerness, she agreed to allow us to become at once engaged lovers. Marriage, she said, must not be thought of till the Colonel's attack had passed

away, and he was in a fit state to give his consent to it.

"I was intoxicated with my sudden happiness. I have since thought I was madly selfish, or I should hardly have construed your mother's deathly whiteness and nervous trembling into the usual agitation of her position. To my disappointment I found that Mrs. Butler's scruples would not even then allow us a moment's privacy; and at times I fancied your mother rebelled against this surveillance in her heart as much as I did openly. I can well divine her reason now.

"She was, I thought, very calm and passive, but I attributed this to her extreme youth and to the sort of awe with which her mother told me she regarded me. A longer engagement would probably have told me the truth, but our marriage was unexpectedly hastened. We had settled to return to England together by way of Paris. Some days before we reached that city, Colonel Butler had a sudden seizure, and died.

"I then learned what I might have known sooner if I had cared to inquire, that his affairs

were hopelessly involved ; that, in fact, he lived abroad, because he had not the means of maintaining his position in England. An annuity, some of which would have been due in a few weeks, died with him, and all that was left to the widow was her pension, the first year of which, she told me, would barely serve to defray recent expenses.

“ It seemed to me that the only course open to me, setting inclination entirely apart, was to marry Lettice as soon as we reached Paris, and to offer Mrs. Butler a home at Flairs.

“ She was very grateful ; she only begged me to spare her daughter to her wholly for the short time that now remained. It seemed a natural request, then, so soon after losing her husband, and yet I see a double motive for it now.

“ I pass over our marriage and our return to England. My old neighbours said foreign travel had made me graver, and one among them told me I was too staid a husband for such a lovely girl-wife. I felt grave and saddened, Maurice ; I began to think that all per-

fect happiness is in anticipation. I could be alone with your mother now, and yet it seemed as if no love, no worship, could conquer her shyness and her fear. How I worshipped her with an idolatry that was perhaps sinful, I tell you to prove that, at any rate, at first I tried to make her life a happy one.

“It is hard to go back to the beginning of a feeling. I can scarcely define the first growth of my suspicion that your mother had never loved me. Spite of Mrs. Butler’s assurances, I had felt, even before marriage, that Lettice did not return, or even appreciate, the passion I felt for her; but then I believed, and I believe still, that, so long as a woman is heart free, she may learn to love any husband presented to her by her parents, and be far happier as a wife, than one whose more ardent and ill-regulated feelings render her more exacting.

“Still I began to get impatient for increased affection. I had noticed a sudden deep sadness in her manner soon after our engagement; and as this wore off, I fancied she grew more attached to me. About three months after our

marriage this sadness returned. One day I came into her room, and found her crying bitterly.

"She would give no reason for it, and I grew angry, and insisted. Suddenly, and almost for the first time unasked, she threw her arms round me and implored me to forgive her, and not to tell her mother.

"I made up my mind at once. For some time past it had seemed to me that Mrs. Butler exercised too strong a control over her daughter. Now I decided that she was the bar to our happiness.

"Before the week was over, I told my mother-in-law that Lettice's health required change, and that I should prefer travelling alone with her. Mrs. Butler was displeased; but I had never been accustomed to submit to any woman's dictation, and I made no attempt to conciliate her. To my great surprise and annoyance, Lettice opposed the separation. It roused a spirit of resistance I had not supposed her capable of; but I felt she could not judge for herself as I could, though I suffered far more than she knew, when I saw her grief at parting from her mother.

"I thought change of scene would be her best cure, and I resolved to take her at once away from Flairs, although I was very sorry to miss the expected return of my friend, Stuart Palmer. His life had been as full of vicissitude as mine since our parting.

"While I was too much engrossed by my love for your mother to care for any other living soul, or even to wonder at the silence of so dear a friend, he had been seized with a dangerous fever at Genoa, and had lain there for weeks between life and death. By the time he recovered sufficient strength to travel, his elder brother died, and he suddenly found himself in possession of the family property. The shock tried his strength so severely, that his journey was again delayed. I had not even heard of his illness till the news of Sir Richard Palmer's death reached me; and then I told Lettice all about my friend, and expressed my hope that she would form an exception to the usual rule of wives, and look upon her husband's old companion as a brother. I was still reading my letter, and I said, smiling,—

“ ‘For, you know, you have usurped his place.’

“ She did not answer, and I looked at her.

“ She lay back in her chair, so white, so ghastly, that I thought she was dying. I summoned help, and in the excitement of succouring her, I forgot, till afterwards, what our conversation had been about.

“ Mrs. Butler had left us before this, and we had been much happier since her departure. I saw Lettice had lately seemed delicate and easily tried. I decided that Flairs was too dull and lonely for the continued residence of any one so young as my wife, and we left it at once.

“ I took her to the North, and, to my joy, she grew for a while almost as bright as when I first saw her, and less and less indifferent to my love.

“ We had settled to spend a few weeks in Edinburgh.

“ Hitherto, Maurice, I have written without self-reproach, and my task has been light in comparison ; but now I ask you to remember,

as you read, what it must have cost me to write my own condemnation to my own child !”

The writer must have paused here for a period of time. The writing no longer covered the sheets in straight, unbroken lines ; it seemed more as if detached thoughts and recollections were set down, as their jagged, broken outlines were forced from the unwilling memory.

“ Can I ever forget what must come next in this record—the pleasure party at Hawthornden—the warm and graceful admiration our courteous hostess expressed to me of my fair young wife ?

“ ‘ Mrs. Dryden is as good as she is lovely !’ she said ; ‘ but I know you are wishing to show her all our lions, and I cannot wonder at it. I would not spare her to any one else !’

“ I was rejoiced at the permission. I had no wish to be a jealous or suspicious husband, and yet, at this, the first large, social gathering of entire strangers in which Lettice had appeared, I felt almost angered by the undisguised admiration she excited.

“ I had never been romantic, but I had longed

for a quiet day with Lettice among the beautiful woods of Hawthornden. It had been a great disappointment to find a large party invited to meet us.

"Your mother seemed to enjoy it. She was willing to take my arm and admire all I showed her; but she kept on calling my attention, in her pretty, childlike way, to the gay effect produced by the bright dresses flitting through the trees beside the river; and often I noticed that she looked wistfully over her shoulder, as if she wished to be with the rest of the party.

"We were crossing the bridge. Your mother was looking along the right bank of the river, when, coming up to us from the contrary direction, I saw my friend Stuart Palmer. We were some yards distant, but our eyes met. In his—so it seemed to me—was an expression of passionate anger. He turned away abruptly by the way he had come.

"I stood still, stupefied. It was like a vision.

"I turned round to look at Lettice. She was still gazing along the river bank. I bent over her, to see her face. No, she had not seen Sir

Stuart ; there was no new emotion there, and his sudden appearance must surely have attracted her attention. But she looked weary, and I fancied was longing for more amusement than she found with me. I had thought she would prefer the natural beauties of the place to Roslin, where I knew the greater number of the guests would congregate ; but she told me now, that she had seen so many pictures of the chapel, that she should like to examine it herself.

“ I think, soon after she said this, we were summoned to dinner. I asked our hostess if she knew Sir Stuart Palmer.

“ ‘ Yes, he is in Edinburgh, and I asked him here to-day. But he is still an invalid, and is perhaps afraid of joining an out-door party.’

“ I could not shake off the strange presentiment of evil that the sight of my old friend had created.

“ The days were short now, with long moonlight evenings.

“ A proposal was made during dinner that the chapel should be visited by moonlight.

“ After some discussion this arrangement

was agreed on, although the ladies were warned against the damp, unearthly chill they would find there.

"I made up my mind Lettice should not run such a risk, and I proposed to her to drive there in the yet remaining daylight.

"She said—'Yes, if you like,' cheerfully; but the tears were in her eyes. I felt angry—I thought her too childish.

"I believe she really was the attraction of the day, for when it became known that we were going to Roslin at once, most of the party who had left it unvisited, followed us there.

"I see now, that my mind had been so greatly disturbed by the strange meeting with my friend, that I took a crooked and distorted view of everything. I had not wanted to show Roslin to Lettice in a crowd. I knew that I could tell her more of its history and legends than any one present. I was glad of any opportunity of improving her neglected education, and she seemed always pleased to listen; but now I found myself one of a throng of fashionable idlers, all bent on extracting as much

amusement as possible from the absurd cicerone of the place. He was worse than absurd. I was angry with Lettice at first, for laughing with the others ; but I felt comforted when she turned in disgust from the profane irreverence with which the man explained the exquisite sculptures in the chapel, and looked at me. My jealous discontent melted, and I hoped she had not noticed it.

“ I saw she was glad when I led her away towards the place where the high altar had stood.

“ The last gift I ever had from her, the last look of friendship—for I doubt now if she ever felt love—she gathered there. Through a widening crack in the broad altar stone had sprung a bramble, and on it there still remained a few delicate blossoms.

“ ‘ I shall gather these, Wentworth,’ she said, ‘ in memory of my happy day.’

“ How sweetly she looked up at me then. I felt how selfish and jealous I had been, and I asked her to give me the flowers to keep.

“ She looked incredulous, and then as if she had wronged me, she said—

“ ‘ You don't know how glad I am that you do not think such thoughts silliness.’

“ It seemed to tear away a great veil—for the first time it struck me that I might perhaps not have taken the right way to win her—I had perhaps been too exacting, and had looked on her love too much as a right.

“ I saw by her quick blush and smile how much my answer pleased her now.

“ Evening had come on fast, and when we turned round we were alone in the centre of the chapel. Lettice looked frightened. I remember teasing her and asking her if she really expected any of the mailed St. Clairs to start up in the full panoply in which tradition says they lie buried. But she looked so really terrified, that I took her to the open door of the chapel, while I returned to its farthest extremity to see if there were yet daylight to examine one of the brasses about which a discussion had arisen at dinner-time.

“ When I came back to Lettice, I found her so white and trembling that I blamed myself for leaving her, and I hurried her back to the rest of the party.

“The moon’s rising was to be the signal of general return to Hawthornden; for when we came out of the chapel, we found the rest of the party we had left busy in finding carriages and arranging places therein.

“I became separated from Lettice, and when the moon rose some of the men with whom I was talking proposed to walk to the house by a nearer way than that taken by the carriages, which were now beginning to drive off. I was going to look for your mother and tell her my intention, when one of the party told me I might spare myself the trouble, as she had just driven off with our hostess.

“I did not see your mother on my arrival; but all the party had not assembled, and I grew deeply interested in a debate that was carried on among some of the gentlemen. I remember being surprised to find how late it had grown, and I went to seek Lettice, blaming myself for having left her so long among strangers.

“I believe dancing had begun in another room, and not seeing her anywhere I passed through the rooms to where the sounds of

the music led me, when a person, I suppose the chief servant, came up to me.

"He believed I was Mr. Dryden. Mrs. Dryden had been taken suddenly ill, and had gone home. He did not tell me he had been desired to withhold this information for at least an hour.

"I hurried away as soon as I could. I was not frightened, but I knew what an effort it must have cost my timid, gentle wife, to contrive her own departure among so many strangers. I was glad she had had sense to do it, though I blamed myself again for keeping away from her.

"You who have known me as a stern, unloving man, will hardly believe the tender speeches, the fond soothing that I hurried home to offer—thoughts never to be spoken.

"Your mother's maid met me. Her mistress had returned very poorly, she said; but she hoped now she was sleeping quietly.

"Sleeping quietly—she looked like marble in the fixed rigidity of expression as I gently drew aside the curtain to gaze at her, except for a painful flushed streak on the one upturned cheek. There was none of the repose of sleep on her

face, and for an instant I thought her eyelids quivered as I bent down over her.

"If I could I would omit the story of the next few months. Never, Maurice, from that night did your mother give me one word or look of love. She was silent to sullenness, except when she gave way to such long passionate weeping, that I feared for her life.

"To all my appeals for explanation, she opposed the most obdurate silence. The doctors—for at first I imagined it might have a physical cause—shook their heads after a short attendance, and ordered their favourite panacea, change.

"But at last I grew fairly wearied out, and we returned to Flairs. I could not make up my mind to send for Mrs. Butler, who was now living abroad. A horrible idea at times possessed me that Lettice had inherited her father's malady, and I dreaded to hear it confirmed. I thought this fear, then, the worst man could be called on to suffer. I tell you it was ease—bliss, contrasted with the hell of feeling that lay before me.

"It was Christmas when we returned to Flairs, but the openly unhappy terms on which I now lived with your mother, made it impossible to receive any guests. I was glad of a business excuse to go to London for a fortnight. I hoped absence might change her manner. When I reached home, I went to your mother's room, and learned that she had not returned from a walk.

"I heard also that my old friend had come down to Lermouth. I resolved to find out if it were really he whom I had seen for that brief instant in Scotland, though I shrank from letting him know my unhappiness.

"I went over to him at once, but he was not at home either.

"You know what a little way separates the gates of the two perks.

"As I rode out of his avenue I saw him coming through my own gate striding on with folded arms and his hat pulled over his face—even in the momentary glance I thought he was in great agitation.

"I called to him, springing from my horse as I did so.

"I saw the same face I had seen at Hawthornden; but now there was an evil intent in it.

"He passed by me like the wind. I hesitated whether I should follow him, but in such fierce anger, before I could explain away any offence he might have taken, he might say or do what I could not forgive.

"I went on towards home. I was sad and wearied—wife and friend alike estranged. What had I done to be so heavily burdened?

"Instead of following the road, I passed through the hanging wood along the river.

"Leaning against the trunk of the great beech-tree — where I saw you with Elinor — was Lettice. Oh God! why did I not die then, and leave her to freedom and happiness.

"All seemed clear to me at one glance. Your mother loved my friend, and they had taken advantage of my absence to meet.

"If I had waited but one moment!

"I sprang forward, maddened. I said—I could never remember what—and then I asked

your mother how she dared meet Sir Stuart privately in my woods.

"Her eyes flashed back at mine as they had never done before. She said I had spoken falsely ; but as I was capable of suspecting her, she would meet Sir Stuart when and where she pleased.

"She tried to pass me ; I grasped her arm rudely, and led her to the house.

"I saw it all now. During my absence she had met him—she loved him, and his love for her was the secret of his present conduct, but it had been the same in Scotland when Lettice knew nothing of him. How was I certain of this ? With exotic growth suspicion clung to every thought and memory, and I recalled her agitation at the first mention of his name—her illness in Scotland. Fool, idiot that I had been—she should at once confess when she first saw him.

"But she would not answer this question. Her manner towards me had undergone a total change ; there was no longer the shuddering aversion I had lately met with ; she was not the

timid, sullen, wayward girl of the last few months. She seemed reckless of my anger, hardened against me and all the world. She told me she was pure and stainless, and that if I insulted her with doubts she would at once leave me, and seek her mother's protection. She said I dared not upbraid her, for I had lost the right to do so.

"I believed her pure, spite of all my jealous anger. Her eyes met mine fearlessly, but her scorn maddened me into seeming not to believe.

"I hated myself then as much as I hated Sir Stuart. I watched every letter, every movement of my wife's with greedy, jealous suspicion. I had never thought well of women—the conduct of my sister had perhaps influenced this—now I utterly mistrusted them; and yet the longer I reflected, the more probable it seemed, that your mother had no previous knowledge of Sir Stuart.

"It was some relief when he left the neighbourhood, but how could I tell he was really gone? It might only be a ruse.

“For, Maurice, the evil intent in his eyes gave some right to my suspicions, and how could I hope to rival him, my superior in everything likely to please a woman—a woman who hated and shunned me, whose very love for him had sprung from the unhappiness I caused her?”

“But I cannot dwell upon the depths of misery in which I lived those months. No wonder if Lettice hated me, I had become a morose and gloomy jailer. I knew I should soon become a father, and sometimes a hope came that this child might bring peace if it could not bring love; though to myself it seemed as if I no longer wished for her love, and that mine had died in the past.

“Just about the time when she was least fit to travel, she spoke earnestly to me about our unhappiness, and expressed a wish to revisit Scotland. I should not have consented, but I heard that the man I now feared as much as I hated him, would soon be again near Flairs; and besides, Lettice hinted that after your birth she would be open with me.

“Go on, Maurice, hastily, for the end is more than I can dwell upon.

“Your birth was hastened by our carriage being overturned in a wild, lonely district near Abergeldie, for your mother insisted on going still northwards; and lately, free from the haunting fear of other influences, I had striven to gratify her wishes. When we reached the small, lonely inn where we only proposed to take fresh horses, I found she could proceed no further.”

* * * *

Here came another break in the manuscript, and the after writing was hurried and indistinct.

“Maurice, by next day your mother was dead—in that lonely place, among strangers, ignorant peasants—better so it seemed to me—they were likely to be slow-witted, and might mistake my agitation for sorrow.

“Maurice, when your mother’s maid, who had been both doctor and nurse to Lettice, brought you to me at the cottage door where I

had rushed from the bed-side, it was as much as I could do to keep from dashing you against some of the unpicked masses of stone in the road.

"You will shudder at such ferocity, but listen.

"During our journey your mother had told me she wished you to be called Maurice-Wentworth, her father's name and mine, and I had promised to consent. As soon as possible after your birth she sent for me, and made me repeat this promise. She was dying then, but I did not know it.

"The woman held you in her arms, but I had eyes only for Lettice. For a moment it seemed as if she were indeed at last my own.

"I thanked her fondly for the blessing she had brought us both, but she stopped me.

" 'Not thanks, Wentworth,' she whispered, 'only pardon ; and if you cannot pardon me, love my child—it is mine, too, remember.' The look of deep sorrow, of perfect humiliation, in-

stead of restoring confidence, roused again the fearful jealousy of my nature.

"It must have shown in my face.

"She tried to stretch out her hand, and the last words came in a faint whisper.

" 'Remember—he was my first love—long ago—forgive me for loving him too well. I know now how deeply I have sinned towards you—but forgive me.' . . .

"The rest is all confusion. I remember the mistress of the inn led me out of the room, and told me the lady's life hung on a thread; and the next thing that stands out clearly was the resolution I made beside the cottage door looking down the wild, lonely glen, her last words beating on my brain, that I would never own you as my son, and that no one should ever know your mother's shame.

"If I had not sworn solemnly to keep these vows, Sir Stuart's life would not have been safe on my return.

"Even if I would, I have no power to relate the state of mind that followed—I believe it was partial insanity. I went abroad for some

years. Soon after my return, I heard that the woman in whose charge I had placed you was dying.

"I believed the worst—I believed Sir Stuart to be your father. The mystery of your mother's sudden dislike to me in Scotland was all now accounted for. She said she had loved Sir Stuart long ago. They must have met at Hawthornden, and her pretext of illness for quitting the party had all been feigned. I longed to question Mrs. Butler about their first acquaintance, but this would have revealed my suspicions and my dishonour. And yet, Maurice, I still loved your mother. Her last words, to remember you were her child, still haunted me. I dared not let you take the outcast fate that seemed threatening you. The news, too, had come so suddenly, that I had no time for deliberation. I believed I might trust my faithful servant Ben, with a part of my secret. He went to Scotland to fetch you, and to bring you up as his own relation. All he knew was that you were the child of my bitterest enemy, whom a scruple of conscience in-

duced me to befriend. But with a secret distrust even of myself, I wrote at once to my sister, and offered to adopt her eldest child.

"You know all the rest. You understand your seclusion, and my rigid avoidance of you. It was not only hate, Maurice. I saw you once on your first arrival, when you were unconscious of the keen agony your face caused me. You had your mother's eyes, and I dared not meet them.

"Did you hear it said just about the time I sent you to London, that the Squire was a changed man, that at last he had got over his deep sorrow for the death of his wife?

"Can you fancy how a convict feels when after years of penal servitude in a chained gang, his irons are struck off, and he is declared free? Sir Stuart's death had brought me this freedom.

"In one sad, painful half-hour, Maurice, I learned that I had wronged friend, wife, child, alike unjustly; that the man who now so heroically increased tenfold his sufferings to leave peace of mind with me—me, the robber of his

earthly joys—had been the accepted lover of my wife before I ever saw her ; that when the increasing warmth of my manner alarmed Lettice, she wrote to warn him, and also to tell him that her mother had forbidden her to correspond with him.

“ It seems she was unguarded enough in her simple innocence to tell her mother what she had done, and that both Sir Stuart’s reply and his letter to me were intercepted.

“ Mrs. Butler wrote to him herself haughtily, declining the honour of his alliance, and announcing her daughter’s engagement to me, before it actually happened. She also succeeded, by a series of manœuvres for which I did not think she had capacity, in persuading him that we had gone to Genoa, for she had read his frank, high-spirited nature rightly, and guessed that when he found his letters unanswered, he would follow them.

“ There, as I have said, he was seized with fever, and by the time he was able to understand what passed around him, we were married.

“ Mrs. Butler’s next move was to persuade

her daughter of Palmer's faithlessness. Her task must have been very difficult at this time, for Lettice confessed to Stuart that she consented to our engagement only on her mother's assurance that nothing else could save her poor imbecile father from a prison; and then, when in her after terror she wanted to draw back, Mrs. Butler must in some way have falsified matters, for she showed her daughter a letter in which Palmer's approaching marriage was plainly stated. It is probable his name may have been substituted for that of his brother, or the letter altogether forged. It seems strange that Lettice should have trusted her mother so fully.

"If she had only feared me less, all might have been explained, and this would have been if we had seen each other more unrestrainedly.

"I feel you will hate your mother's mother, Maurice; and yet she only followed her own views of things. She was a mere woman of fashion; she considered the highest and noblest of a mother's duties was to place her daughter as high in the social scale as possible by her

marriage. She knew that at any moment her husband might be taken suddenly from her, and that then she and Lettice with her must sink into obscurity, where her daughter's remarkable beauty would only succeed in attracting attention which might perhaps include insult. Stuart Palmer was a younger son, and it was only his impetuosity that had prevailed on her even to give a temporary consent to his suit; but he told me he was persuaded by what he learned afterwards, that Mrs. Butler took her daughter to Rome solely to meet me, and that our first interview was planned and watched for. It is possible.

"When I was summoned to his bedside, I believed I was going to listen to the confession of my own dishonour, and to be implored for forgiveness. I have told you what I learned there, but I have not told you all.

"Altogether, before my marriage, he wrote to me three times, but of course my mother-in-law was prepared for his interference, and the letters never reached me.

"He had met us by accident at Hawthornden,

but having seen us, he was resolved to know from Lettice whether she had been as faithless as her husband.

“He found a sharp-witted gipsy child, who, I remember, had been noticed by the ladies in the early part of the day, and when I left Lettice standing alone at the door of the chapel, the boy slipped a note into her hand, bidding her say where she would meet the writer when the moon rose. The note added, that if she refused a private meeting, she should give it in her husband’s presence.

“She sent word by the child, that after the rest had gone she would meet him in the chapel. How she contrived to hide herself while the carriages drove off, and to brave her terrors in that lonely place, I could never comprehend; but the intense excitement, and possibly fear of a quarrel between Stuart and me, urged her on.

“He was generous enough to confess to me that at first she maddened him by entreating him to leave her, and not to alienate by his presence the affection she was beginning to feel for her husband.

"Then he asked her to see plainly what she had done, and painted me fully to her as the false, traitorous friend who had stolen the promised wife of the man he professed to love as a brother, knowing her to be promised. He said he had to reiterate it many times before she would believe him, or confess that she loved him still. Then, he said, she became suddenly desperate, and told him if he would promise never to see her again, she would always love him, and never pardon me.

"He promised, though he said he knew he could not keep his word, and they parted.

"He wrote to her, but she never answered him in all that long, weary time, when her heart must have been slowly breaking, with the conviction of her husband's falsehood towards the man whom, I believe, she still fondly loved until his return to Flairs.

"But then she changed. They had met once for a few moments only before my return, and she had reproached him with breaking his promise.

"He owned that, knowing my absence, he wrote and implored her to meet him again in

the wood, in order to take a last farewell. When he told me this he was dying, Maurice, and he solemnly declared he meant never to see her again after this last interview. He was too little self-conscious to know the strength or subtlety of his own passions. Before the interview was over he had implored Lettice to leave me, to leave England with him, and to become his wife in some distant country, where no one could question her right to the name.

"At first she did not understand him; then she recoiled, with a look on her face that, he told me, he had never been able to forget.

"She bade him begone, and never thrust himself upon her again. She said he had destroyed all her trust in any man's goodness; that she shrank from him far more than she did from me, for he had done worse. I had robbed my friend, but I had not tried to dishonour him. So vehement were her reproaches that he dared not urge her further, though he left her vowing he would see her again. You know now the meaning of the evil look I saw in his face when we met at the park gates.

"Perhaps, Maurice, had I been less ready to accuse your mother, she might in her agitation have freely told me all when I found her under the beech-tree. God only knows ; it is useless to speculate on what might have been.

"He never saw her again face to face, though he told me he constantly watched for an opportunity, but she never ventured across the river, and he was still too careful of her reputation to try to meet her where they would have been observed. How little we either of us knew of what, she whom we both loved so madly, suffered for our sakes.

"I knew that Ben, by my orders, had always kept you out of Stuart Palmer's sight. He so seldom visited his property that this was easy, and now when I saw him dying, I did not even tell him of your existence. I would not cloud our last moments together, when all the fond affections of boyhood seemed intensified and renewed by our mutual repentance and sorrow, by telling him how I had blighted my own life, had given myself a perpetual remorse.

"When he thanked God so fervently that

her purity had preserved him from actual sin, I could not tell him how far my suspicions had led me.

“For, Maurice, in this new light thrown on your mother’s feelings towards me, I seemed to myself a monster of suspicion and indulged jealousy.

“It was hard to lose him, but in my heart I thanked God for this punishment. It seemed some expiation; and how could I have ever shared my shameful secret with him?

“You know the rest. You know that, hard as it must have seemed to you, I decided at once to separate you from Flairs, for the sake of your education, and also that no one might recognise in the future Maurice Dryden, Ben’s protégé. There was not much fear of this, for you had lived in such perfect isolation from all.

“Before Ben died, I had promised him that I would care for your future as for that of my own child; and as I said this, it seemed to me that he looked at me with a strange inquiring glance, but I turned away. If Ben had any suspicions, there was no occasion to satisfy them.

He was the only person at Flairs in whom your mother had ever betrayed an interest, and I believe in that remembrance arose my strong regard for him.

"But, Maurice, he knows all now—I told him all when he lay dying.

"Still, my living punishment remains. I have a son, in whom I discern all the promise that gladdens a father's heart, and yet I can never claim him as my son. I may never once, even at my death-hour, hold him to my heart or hear him call me father.

"I have told you all, Maurice. As she bid me remember that you were her son, so I ask you from my grave to remember that, however blindly and erringly, still I loved till my death the angel who was your mother.

"May God in mercy bless you."

CHAPTER X.

FATHER AND SON.

MAURICE sat stupefied with the last page of the manuscript open before him.

Mechanically, like an echo, these words seemed to repeat themselves—"The angel who was your mother,"—"Mother"—the name he had longed to speak all his life. Was he only to know it as a theme of heartrending and bitter sorrow?

This was his first defined thought; but soon through this new crowd of events and ideas loomed one of deep thankfulness, broadening as it reached him till it seemed to efface for the moment all gloom—all sorrow.

His mother was pure—no shame rested on

her, nor could ever rest ; for who would ever know him as Mr. Dryden's son ? This was bitter, but it must be.

At times, while he read, his anger had risen high against his father. It seemed to him that no man with any heart could have made a girl his wife so obviously against her will, without suspecting a previous love.

But the end softened him ; and by his own pride Maurice knew what it must have cost that stern, proud man thus to humble and bare his inmost feelings. He forgot the Squire's tyrannical claims on his obedience, and the price at which he had owned himself his father. It seemed as if at least he owed him some affection for the confidence he had bestowed.

He raised the curtain of the library door, and went in.

His father was seated just under the picture of old Sir Fulke ; his face as pale and bloodless as that of the stern old soldier. He neither moved nor looked up as Maurice advanced ; only the hand that rested on the arm of the chair trembled visibly.

Maurice saw it. He threw his arms round his father, and he felt the whole frame quiver in his strong grasp.

Few words at all passed between the new-found father and son—none on the subject of Cecil, till both had gazed long and reverently on the picture in the White Bedchamber.

As his father reclosed the panel, Maurice looked round the room. This then had been his mother's bridal chamber. Here probably some of her bitterest tears had been wept. For a moment a hard unforgivingness rose against the man who had cropped this fair young flower, only to blight its beauty by harsh suspicion.

His father's voice roused him; he led the way through a door, beside the picture, into two other rooms arranged for habitation, and he told his son these were intended for him; but he carefully locked the door through which they had passed.

"You may have heard it surmised," he smiled faintly, "that the North Gallery is haunted. I

suppose if it were known that one room in it is perpetually closed, this would be established as a fact."

He paused—for in the first moments of reunion, in the first joy his lonely, hungering heart had known for so very, very long, it was hard to rouse discord, and yet delay was impossible.

His voice sounded strained and hard again.

"Maurice!—now you know and have acknowledged the claim I have on your obedience, you will no longer refuse it."

His son's face darkened. It was strange to see what strong resolute lines were traced already round his mouth.

"Father," he said at last, "be merciful! You have taught me that you know what Love is—can you not feel for mine? I cannot give up Cecil. Can you not see that if I were forced to marry Elinor, my life would be the same living misery which destroyed my mother?"

Mr. Dryden started as if some one had struck him.

"No!" he said, after a while; "it is different—there would be no deception here; no

miserable after-remorse for what might have been prevented. I promised to make Elinor my heiress, if she married as I wished. You must share Flairs with her. If you are what I believe you to be, you shrink as much as I do from the stain the avowal of your birth must bring on your mother's name—and without that avowal, how can I treat you as my son? If you marry Elinor you take the name of Dryden as her husband, and you both become my children without arousing inquiry."

"But there is yet another way," Maurice spoke eagerly; "make Elinor your heiress—only reserving for me what you may think fitting; or, do nothing for me—let me carve out my own place in the world. With Cecil as my aim I am sure of success."

The likeness between the two faces showed itself strangely now through their different expressions—the one, beautiful with youth and impassioned hope; the other, worn and withered with sorrow and disappointment.

They looked at each other fixedly, each seeing the other's opposition written in his face—each

dreading and shrinking' from the issue, and yet each resolved not to yield.

"Has your own determination, Maurice, taught you nothing, then?" The Squire's voice was hurried and agitated. "Do you think that years of trial and bitterness have softened my will when it is once bent on what is right and just?"

He had strained the new cord too tightly, and it gave way.

"But is neither right nor just," said Maurice, impetuously. "Is it right to break Cecil's heart? Is it just to break my own faith? I would rather——"

He did not finish—not because of the rising anger in the Squire's face, but because there came a decided rapping at the door leading into the Gallery, followed by Northover's voice, inquiring if she could see the Squire.

She would not be denied, and Mr. Dryden opened the door in dignified wonder at her persistence.

"If you please, sir, it's something you *must* look to."

"Well, then you had better say what it is."

"Alone—to you, if you please, sir;"—and she looked at Maurice, who was walking into the other room, when the Squire stopped him.

"You can speak before Mr. Dryden."

Northover bridled and looked as if it would be the height of impropriety; but the reflection of old Sir Fulke in the Squire's eyes quickened her tongue.

"Very well, sir, then it's this. You took no heed to what I took the liberty of remarking about Miss Elinor. Now, if you'll believe me, she is talking to a gentleman under the beech tree."

The Squire started. Was his pride never to be spared these deep bitter wounds?

"Hush!" He spoke sternly. "What does it concern you, Northover, to whom Miss Dryden speaks? I believe I know who this person is, and I shall probably be able to dismiss him more easily than Miss Elinor will."

He had paid the jeweller's bill; but it occurred to him that Elinor might not have told

him of all her debts, and that this was some importunate tradesman.

“Keep silence about this, Northover, and another time be careful how you nourish groundless suspicions.”

He went out of the room, and down the little winding staircase, very sick at heart.

Maurice stayed behind. He knew his presence must be painful to Elinor.

CHAPTER XI.

MR. FISHER FINDS HIS WAY TO FLAIRS.

ELINOR had not sought her own room when she reached the gallery. The blood rushing through her veins seemed to scorch her with its heat. She must breathe the free air, if she would not suffocate under this intolerable humiliation.

Scorned ! rejected ! She had felt so sure of Maurice's love, and the thought of it had done much to reconcile her to her sacrifice. What had happened to change him ? All this she asked in short, passionate questioning, as she hurried along. She had just self-restraint enough left to avoid any risk of being seen by the servants, and passed through the North Gallery, down the old

deserted staircase she had so often used in childhood. It seemed tedious to-day, or she was less fearless in treading the broken steps ; but at last she stood safe outside the great yew wall that screened the flower-garden from the park.

The chilly air was grateful to her fevered head. Hurrying along, she had said she would think when she found herself alone and under the free sky ; but now, thought was impossible. Surging, tumultuous, almost frenzied, passion swayed her ; she half buried her head in the dark green yew hedge, and sobbed—hard, heart-breaking sobs—which gave no relief, except to the mere animal part of her pride.

Then, as she tried to look her situation in the face, her passion ceased—but only for a moment.

It returned with almost convulsive strength, shaking her frame till she was glad to cling to the hedge for support.

She stood there a long while, insensible to sights and sounds.

Meanwhile Northover's head peeped cautiously from the door by which she had issued, and was as suddenly withdrawn.

Some time afterwards, invisible from where Elinor stood, but plainly to be seen from any of the windows of the North Gallery, or from the little door, a man appeared in the distance coming across towards the river from the north side of the park.

Strangers sometimes struck out of the foot-path across the open ground, to see the far-famed beech-tree; but this was a rare occurrence when the family was "down."

This person seemed to be making for the tree. Instead of going straight to the river, he swerved to the right, taking a slanting direction, which would soon bring him in sight of Elinor.

By degrees, as her violence wore itself out, her sobs grew less. She raised her head, and looked round her, almost surprised to find all so still, while she was full of storm and unrest.

A new feeling, the offspring of real sorrow, awoke in her. Oh, if she had only one friend in the world to open her heart to now! Her father—no, he must never know her humiliation—no one must ever know it. She did not think even of her mother, or Adelaide. She

wanted help—she must punish Maurice. It would be as basely tame to sit quietly under such an insult, as for a man meekly to receive a blow in the face.

And the remembrance bore her thoughts back to Maurice. He had loved her once, far more passionately, it had then seemed to her, than James had done. His last words came back. Was it jealousy that withheld him? For a moment hope returned, and she saw herself the mistress of Flairs, and the wife of Maurice. But, no; backed by Mr. Dryden's influence, even if he had deemed his suit difficult, he would have urged it. Disappointment—that cold, white, crawling worm, ate into her heart like a canker—a canker worse than the sorrow of death, for that is God's ordinance and disposing. This, to our finite wisdom seems chargeable to our own short-comings.

Elinor writhed now, as she remembered her haughtiness to Maurice. Was he revenging himself for that? No, he looked—even in her anger she owned this—too much like Hubert Dryden to have any mean or spiteful feelings

about him. But the insult remained the same—it was cruel, dastardly. If she were but a man, to revenge it !

A sound—the feeling of a presence near her—roused her to look up. Within a dozen yards, but unconscious of her neighbourhood—for he had determined not to look round till he reached the beech tree—was James Fisher. Was she awake? Could it indeed be, that when she thought herself most desolate, a friend, able and willing to take her part, had come to her help?

She looked about her. There was no one else in sight ; but then, no one else, except the Squire or herself, was likely to visit that unfrequented side of the house, effectually parted from the flower garden, nearly to the river's edge, by the high yew hedge.

She would have liked to prevent James from reaching the beech tree. Once under its broad, leafy shade, they were safe ; but the open space all round it would make his return thence more liable to observation. But why should she care? He was all that was left to her. She must sink or rise with him now, for ever.

In a moment she was beside him.

In her heart Elinor thanked God when she found he had not received her last peremptory letter. Perhaps he would never know that she had refused him a last farewell. But she had no time to linger over explanations now, or to ask why he had entered the Park by a gate on this side the river.

It was indeed soothing to listen to his tender reproaches and protestations, and to witness his delight when she told him that she could never give him up for any one.

"But you must prove the truth of your love. You must love me only for myself. I have no hope of Flairs now, and I would not marry Maurice for Flairs twice over. I will never forgive him, James. Oh! if I were only a man, to give him the punishment he deserves!" Her face was flushed, and her hair disordered, but she looked beautiful in her passionate vehemence, and Mr. Fisher told her so. She went on rapidly—"James, will you take my quarrel on yourself?—you are my best friend!"

"I will do all I can"—her excitement roused.

his caution ; “ but first, my darling, you must calm yourself, and tell me exactly how this insolent boy has offended you.”

She stamped her foot with impatience. She was far too much overwrought to think of management.

“ I did not expect this ! I should have thought the very notion of insult to me would have made you more angry than I am myself. But, perhaps you have not understood. I tell you that Maurice Dryden, as he calls himself, has grievously and grossly insulted me. I will swear it, if you like ! ”

“ You are unjust to me, Elinor. Men are never so impulsive as women are, my darling girl. You have only to say what you wish me to do—if you still prefer not to answer my question as to the offence given.”

Elinor’s lip curled. It seemed to her that Mr. Fisher ought to have been all a flame to revenge her—that the idea of the slightest affront offered to her should have transported him beyond any need of prompting, and she told him very haughtily, he could choose out of two

things—he must either horsewhip Maurice, or send him a challenge.

Mr. Fisher raised his hands in deprecation ; but though he forced a smile, he grew a shade paler under Elinor's penetrating glance.

“ You are not in earnest, dearest ? A challenge is a thing of the past. No sane man could resort to such a foolish and romantic proceeding ; and one can't horsewhip a man in cool blood, my Elinor. If this young upstart will only offer me reasonable provocation, you may depend I'll not be wanting. At best it's an ungentlemanlike performance, but in cold blood—really——”

Elinor's colour had varied ; but as she broke in now, her lip trembled, as it seemed, more with sorrow than with scorn.

“ Cold blood ! How much insult does it take to warm yours, James ? Look here”—she struck her hands sharply together—“ if you saw Maurice give me such a blow as that, would you be in any way moved to chastise him ? Well, then—don't stop me, now—I tell you, James, he has offered me a deeper insult ; and if you will

not take my quarrel on yourself, I feel that I cannot love you—I cannot even like you.”

A sudden exclamation from Mr. Fisher stopped her. He was looking towards the house, and Elinor perceived her uncle coming directly towards them.

She started, but she did not look alarmed. She drew a deep breath. At last all deception was ended.

“That is my uncle, James, and I am glad all concealment will be ended, and I shall be freed from his persecution about Maurice, for I know he would still have persisted, and it gives you an opportunity of declaring yourself openly to him.”

She looked into her lover’s eyes for his answer.

But Mr. Fisher’s eyelids drooped. He felt strangely perplexed and embarrassed — girls were so foolish ; they never realised that diplomacy would effect more than stubborn opposition ; but he was obliged to speak.

“Don’t you think, dearest, that it might be better for me to avoid coming into sudden collision with your uncle. I believe he has a very haughty temper, has he not ?”

His hesitating manner—an undefinable shrinking away from her aroused her more than his words.

The Squire was still at some distance, and with his slow measured tread would take several minutes yet to reach them.

She tried to believe in her lover's courage, and the protection it would afford her against her uncle's anger ;—tried against the quick feminine instinct which drove the truth into her heart, thrilling the sensitive fibres with an agony that was insupportable.

"I don't understand you," she said quickly. "I cannot deceive my uncle by passing you off as another person. What is it you wish me to do?"

He answered without looking at her, although he must have surely felt how intensely her eyes were seeking his.

"Nothing—I only think it would spare you much annoyance, if I were to go. I can find the way over the bridge you told me of. I could not, you know, interfere between you and your uncle. I—I think he will be less angry if he finds you alone. It would be a pity to

make a quarrel, and you will write and tell me what happens."

He turned away almost before his words were all spoken. Elinor stretched out her hand and caught his arm for an instant; then she let it fall as if she had touched a reptile.

"Yes—you can go—you had better go. You are free of me for ever! All the preference you ever won from me was against my first impression—my better judgment. It is the most lasting disgrace of my life, that I have stooped to believe in a coward."

He stopped spell-bound by her words—not spoken vehemently, but with a calm deliberate scorn that whitened her face, even to the lips; then he quailed, as a coward always does quail beneath a woman's contempt, and hurried off rapidly towards the bridge. He had reached it before the Squire joined his niece.

Elinor did not turn one glance towards Mr. Fisher. She stood still, her hands pressed together, her face pale and wrenched with that soul-centred agony, which—may God help us under it—though we generally bring it on our-

selves, we need, so far as requisite endurance is concerned, only to feel once in our lives.

But her uncle was very near the beech-tree now—the pain must be trampled on awhile. She, at least, would be no coward.

She stepped out to meet him, from under the trailing branches.

“You need not ask any questions, uncle,” she said in a defiant voice, for she felt that she must do battle with all the world if she would keep self-respect from sinking in the fierce, hard struggle going on within. “I will tell you everything. That man sneaking off in the distance, I had promised myself to before I returned to Flairs. He came here to-day by no appointment of mine, and I asked him in return for my love to revenge the insult Maurice offered me just now. You may judge if any reproach from you can humble me further. His answer has been what you see—to leave me here to bear the full brunt of your anger alone, because he feared to meet you. You will say I deserve this, and anything else that could happen for my deceit and folly. God knows!—perhaps I do.”

She paused and looked in his face, while her own quivered in every feature with the restless agitation she was keeping down by her strong will.

Mr. Dryden did not know how to answer her. Her impassioned manner had kept him silent. He had not seen her so fearless since her childhood. Was this truth at last? and had the rest been only well acted deceit?

He either thought this, or the nobler part of his nature forbade him to reproach her.

He bowed his head gravely.

"You will tell me the name of this person, Elinor?"

"Mr. Fisher—a cousin of my father's." The last words sprang from a womanly longing to give some excuse for an intimacy begun under her father's roof; but then she crimsoned with shame at being of the same blood with one so unworthy.

"And you have now parted for ever?"

She made a mute sign of assent—it would have choked her to speak of him again.

"I have nothing to say, Elinor," said her

uncle, simply; "but you had better go in now."

There was no reproach in his tone; but there was sorrow—a sorrow that forced its way to her heart, through the desperate girl's pride and passion.

"Not yet, uncle. I have not yet said all I must say. I must thank you for the past, and for what I feel a hundred times more—your goodness to me now." Her voice trembled, but she steadied it and went on with increasing vehemence—"Uncle, you cannot think I could still live at Flairs. You cannot desire this. I have broken my compact with you. I have forfeited every claim on your interest or your love, and I promise you I will bear the blame. I have loved you, uncle,"—she could hardly conquer the rising sobs now—"more than you will think so false a nature could love; but I can love while I deceive. I must always love you; but you could never love me, for you could not love where you could not fully trust. I could never satisfy your expectations, unless life became a perpetual hypocrisy. I am not good;

but I may grow better if I have less motive to appear so, and that cannot be in this place—”

She seemed not to have finished speaking, for she paused, looking earnestly at him.

Then, just as he was about to answer her, she snatched his hand with both hers, kissed it, and before he could detain her, passed swiftly out of sight.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DAY AFTER.

MR. DRYDEN was deeply unhappy, keenly mortified : he had hardly a word to spare for Maurice ; but as soon as breakfast was over he shut himself up in his private room, to think again over what had happened, and to write to his niece. He had been thinking all night, as any one might have seen who looked at his pale, sunken eyes ; and like many things over which we brood and mourn, and cannot in any way induce ourselves to accept as inevitable, thinking, in this case, was simply lost time ; the deed was done, and could neither be blotted out or undone.

The Squire had walked up and down by the river-side for some time after Elinor left him on the previous day, trying to comprehend and to find some excuse for her conduct. He did not intend to speak to her until he had quite resolved what line he had best adopt towards her. For the present, at any rate, a union between her and his son was impossible, and he believed Elinor was right in wishing to leave Flairs; but if she did this, she must be placed in safer keeping than her father's. If she had known how severely her uncle blamed himself for his negligence in allowing her to spend so long a time in her own home, she would not have feared his reproaches.

He felt that Roland Markham's want of principle must prove a snare to such a mind, and plan after plan revolved through his brain without any question about Elinor's willing submission. He never imagined that she considered their last meeting had snapped all ties between them, and left her free to choose her own path in life.

The dinner bell roused him, and he went in.

Neither Maurice nor Elinor appeared.

The former had left a message to say he should not be in till evening. Miss Dryden sent word that she was in her room.

But the Squire did not send for her—he was glad she had the good taste to stop away. He felt disappointed that Maurice should be absent—almost vexed—but if he had not been so pre-occupied, he might have guessed the truth, that his son would not pain Elinor by his presence, while they both remained at Flairs.

When he had sent away his scarcely-tasted dinner, he again went through his scene with Elinor, and for the first time her extreme agitation recurred to him vividly. Before, the disgrace, the distress of the whole situation, both to him and to herself, had thrown her manner out of sight. Above all, her repeated falseness had attracted his reflections, but now it was different. How very vehement she had been—almost wild—and how strangely she had thanked him, and assured him of her love. A sudden

thought glanced through his mind, and he laid his hand on the bell.

Then he checked himself, and went straight to Elinor's bed-room.

He knocked twice, but there was no answer, and he went in.

The look of the room was enough ; he hardly needed the little note on the table to tell him that she had left Flairs for ever.

And now, as has been said, he sate next day thinking this over, and wondering what new mortification Fate would hurl against him.

Mr. Dryden could not stoop to deceive, and when he said to Northover—

“ Miss Dryden is gone to London ; she wishes her luggage packed and sent after her,” the cunning housekeeper knew as well as possible that Miss Elinor “ Had turned out just as bad as her own ma, and gone and run away.”

In her private mind she decided it was with the gentleman under the beech-tree, but she had the prudence to keep this hypothesis to herself.

The Squire had just finished a long letter to

his niece. Spite of his vexation at her unseemly flight, he wrote tenderly and kindly, though there was reproof for what had been really wrong in her conduct. But when he tried to warn her against Roland Markham's example, his pen faltered and stopped.—Suddenly he felt he was the last person to interfere between a child and its father; he told her she would find he had settled a sufficient income upon her for life, and if she married with his approbation, he promised to increase this, but he said not one word of Maurice. Even now convinced of her want of principle, and keenly feeling that he could never have married such a woman himself, he mourned over the hopes he felt compelled to relinquish.

He had just sealed his letter, when a servant appeared.

The man had been only a few months at Flairs, and was probably quite ignorant of the family history, for he threw open the writing-room door as if he had brought Mr. Dryden the most delightful surprise in the world.

The Squire looked up astonished; it was

against all laws to show any intruder into his sanctum ; but the announcement that followed explained the man's daring.

"Your brother-in-law, sir, Mr. Markham."

Roland entered with a short, quick, uneasy step, as if he expected to be pulled up on the threshold, while the Squire remained sitting, partly from his extreme surprise, partly because he would not give the slightest sign of greeting to the intruder.

But Roland did not wait for this.

"You are quite aware why I've come, Wentworth Dryden," he said, almost before the door was closed on him, he knew the familiar name would make the Squire writhe ; "what's the meaning of this rascally treatment of my girl Elinor? She's about the best heart that ever beat, and pretends it's all her fault, but I know better. I can see what it is as plain as I can see you."

"Mr. Markham,"—the Squire looked for a moment fully at the man who in his eyes had brought such disgrace on his house,—a double disgrace now, for might not Elinor's faults be

attributed to inheritance and example, her uncle thought so,—“you have done wrongly in coming here. “You will do worse by remaining, or by forcing any discussion upon me. Any explanation you wish for can be transacted in writing, or with my lawyer. I decidedly decline to give you my reasons now for anything I have done.”

He looked away from Markham before he finished speaking. When last he had seen him (it all came back—he remembered it well), he had stood beside his father, old Markham, the attorney, in the Justice room at Flairs—a handsome, bold-looking youth, to whom he had felt an instinctive antipathy. A vulgar style of beauty, perhaps, but he could scarcely have believed that sensual indulgence could have so lowered and imbruted its expression, while the life of perpetual shift and subterfuge had given a knowing, almost sinister, look to the eyes, in which, spite of his abhorrence of the man before him, the Squire recognised a strong likeness to Elinor.

His steady aversion had been founded on truth then, for this man's face spoke his

character. He thought of his poor sister, and sighed. Was it possible she could still love or cling to Roland Markham?

But he was quickly roused by his brother-in-law.

He flung himself into a chair, and refused to leave Flairs—to leave that room even—till his demand was complied with. His wife's income was settled on herself and her children for life, therefore he had no fear of injuring them by his insolence, and he thought Wentworth Dryden's fastidious pride would be willing to compel his silence for the sake of his heir.

He had dropped his blustering tone, thinking it as well not to irritate the Squire beyond endurance, and again asked him to give his own version of Elinor's return to Flairs, and Maurice's sudden appearance there.

Mr. Dryden made him no answer; he seemed resolved to ignore his presence after he had pointed out the means by which he might obtain redress.

Markham's anger rose—

“I have asked you twice, Wentworth Dryden,

as one man has a right to ask another, why after taking my child from me, and promising to adopt her, you send her back to me suddenly, and without condescending to make me aware that you have chosen another heir. I gave you the option of telling the story your own way. I was willing, in fact, to give you a fair hearing; but, by Heaven, your pride is worse than even I believed! Are you and I made of different clay, do you think, that you should dare to treat me as you do? But as you will neither reply or listen to me, the whole world shall hear, that my child has been sent from Flairs for no fault of hers, but to make way for an impostor, your own illegitimate son."

He paused to see the effect of his words, but he was far too impulsive to understand Wentworth Dryden. The blow cut through to his heart, showing him at one glance an interpretation which he had not dreamed of, that might be put upon his conduct, yet outwardly he gave no sign of the wound, except by increased coldness, and by rising slowly from his seat.

"Mr. Markham"—he spoke with a calm

dignity that the other could not have attained had he tried—"this had better end. If you have come here only to insult me, I think you have shown bad taste and bad judgment—do not interrupt me. But as I suppose you would be loath to propagate slander, knowing it to be such, and knowing, moreover, that such a proceeding entails penalties, I tell you that the gentleman whom I have chosen for my heir, was born in lawful wedlock, which if it were necessary he could prove in a court of justice. I believe you have never had cause to doubt my word, and I declare to you solemnly, that Maurice Dryden, as he will hereafter be called, is not my illegitimate son. If you had asked these two plain questions, I should have answered them at once, without necessitating the amount of bully and swagger which you see has frustrated the avowed purpose of your intrusion on me——"

"By Jove, Dryden, your language is a little too strong," blustered Markham; but the Squire went on firmly —

"For I distinctly refuse any detailed explana-

tion of my parting with Elinor. You know"—he laid an emphasis on the word—"that from me you had no right to expect she would *inherit* Flairs, and from herself you have possibly already learned that she has even forfeited the conditions on which I had hoped she might do so. But"—he touched the letter on the table—"she will learn by this the provision I have made for her, which your interference—and I must add insolence, Mr. Markham—can neither make nor mar."

He saw an ill-repressed smile curling Roland's lip, and he went on—

"After the insult you have offered, I advise you to leave me at once. If you spoke it in any hope of inducing me to buy your silence you must see your mistake. Whether derived from others, or coined by yourself, it is simply one of the blackest falsehoods that one man ever devised against another, and as such must take the usual fate of unsupported falsehood—contempt. Now I will ring for the servant to show you out."

And all this while, at every word he spoke,

the wound bled inwardly. It might be that the depth of pain gave a yet nobler, loftier dignity to his manner, for when the servant appeared Roland Markham departed more quietly than could have been expected, only grumbling out—that it was very well to say so, but it would be an ugly story to live down.

But the real talisman that produced his silence—though the Squire had not thought of this—was the sealed letter on the table. Till he knew its contents it might be as well, in his own familiar language, “to shut up.” He knew in his heart that Dryden would not break his word when once pledged to another; but it would not be breaking his word to re-write that letter.

CHAPTER XIII.

JOY.

MAURICE found his father in an almost death-like state of insensibility. The blow had been so sudden, and the trials of the last few weeks had been so incessant and over-strained, that Nature gave way under the overwhelming pressure.

But when Mr. Dryden came to himself, he had no mind to shrink from the pain that had crushed him.

He told Maurice plainly of Roland Markham's suspicions, and offered to publish the truth, if his son thought this scandal likely to

gain credit. There was a nervous working in his features, which showed the suffering he must have gone through, before he could have resolved on such a sacrifice—a revelation which his whole life had been spent in guarding against.

But Maurice did not need this to decide him. He told his father that his own knowledge of his birth was sufficient for him. He had never lived in the world, and he was totally indifferent to its opinions, and even on the low ground of expediency he could not see that the telling his mother's story would establish his legitimacy with people who were resolved to dispute it.

And then he checked himself, for he felt how painful this must be to the Squire.

His father looked at him long without speaking. Then he opened his arms and folded Maurice to his heart for the first time fervently, and with the full trust of a parent's love—a love mingled with admiring reverence. There was something in his son's perfect forgiveness, in his noble ungrudging resolution to bear through life any stigma which his father's act

had engendered, that he could scarcely realize. It moved him strongly; and when Maurice urged him to go to his room, and rest for some hours, after such an unusual illness, he shook his head—

“I must write two letters first, Maurice; and then, perhaps, I will do as you say. But”—he smiled fondly in his son's face—“I think you must leave me; my happiness is almost too much for me, now.”

He held out his hand, and Maurice left him after that silent pressure, which repeated to him his father's love and trust.

He brushed the tears from his eyes as he strode across the flower-garden, and over the little bridge. What did he care for Markham and his vile slanders? Just then, his heart was so full of love for his father, that even Cecil herself was not thought of. “If Ben had only lived,” he murmured, as he went up through the old wood towards the gamekeeper's cottage; “how proud and happy he would have been.” He had passed the previous afternoon in rambling over every well remembered haunt, and

each had vividly recalled the memory of his dear old friend.

He thought now, as he strolled towards the cottage, that Flairs had but one want—nothing linked it with Cecil, except that one remembrance of her vision-like face in the North Gallery. There was much in the wood itself, and the level above, to remind him at every step of Elinor; and it was painful to him to be so reminded. After all, she had been his first benefactress, and he had been the means of driving her from Flairs; for, although the Squire offered no explanation, he had told his son that Elinor would not return.

Deep in his heart Maurice thanked God that he had loved Cecil instead of Elinor; but still, the feeling of ingratitude, of ill-requited obligation, was painful. And yet Roland's threat had done more to reconcile him to his father's decision about Elinor than any persuasion. To restore her expected inheritance now, would be to acknowledge the truth of Markham's slander, and tacitly to bribe him to silence. And beyond this, with the assurance of his father's love

had come a willingness to submit to his judgment, which surprised Maurice himself. In a day or two, when the Squire seemed himself again, he resolved to ask what had been decided for Elinor, and how far it would be possible to settle such a sum upon her as would make the disparity in their prospects less unequal.

He was more eager to talk of this than to revive the subject of Cecil with his father. A true instinct told him to trust the Squire really, and not to disturb by any impatience or self will, the warm, strong love, that held them fast together now.

And for the two days that followed Elinor's departure, his own studies and Ben were the chief subjects of talk—for both father and son were thinkers—and the very sight of each other at present provoked reverie and remembrance rather than conversation.

On the third day Maurice received a sudden summons to the writing-room. He obeyed it hastily, with a secret dread that he might find his father as he had found him after Markham's departure. There had been a nervous excite-

ment about him in the morning, which had puzzled and disquieted his son.

But at the door of the writing-room Mr. Dryden stood ready to receive him.

"You will not quarrel with me to-day, Maurice"—and he smiled—a smile that looked away from his son to some one else who stood beyond him.

It was Cecil. Blushing, trembling with joy and emotion, his Cecil now.

At least, that was what he called her when he took her to his heart, and kissed her, just as if the Squire had been any where else. And then he turned to his father, and thanked him with his eyes far more than words.

Mr. Dryden smiled at them both.

"You give me thanks, Maurice," he said, "for what was not mine to give, and what"—he looked slyly at Cecil—"you seem quite ready to help yourself to, without any leave from me. But I don't blame him, my child"—he bent down, and kissed her forehead; "I love him all the better for having chosen you."

Cecil took his hand and kissed it, just as she

had done before, at the time of her father's death.

"I think I have an older claim on your love than he has," she said, looking archly at Maurice; "you were my father before you were his."

"And I almost believe," said Maurice, when the Squire had left them to join Mr. and Miss Brownlow, who were awaiting him in dutiful mystification in the drawing-room, "that you love my father better than you do me, even now."

"Perhaps I do," Cecil laughed; "but then, I know him better. Was I right or wrong, to bid you go to Flairs, and trust him?"

CHAPTER THE LAST.

WHEN Elinor found that in spite of all her faithlessness her uncle meant still to befriend her, she was deeply moved, and for a time she sorrowed more acutely that she had forfeited her right to his love than to his inheritance.

But hers was a nature in which good once developed would manifest itself in action rather than in thought or regret for past errors.

She told her mother—for the present she shrank from her father's counsels—that she wished to begin life again, and that this would be done best by leaving England, and with it the ties and associations of the past. She told her mother, too, with an openness that fairly

astonished poor Mrs. Markham, the whole story of James Fisher's double-dealing—for her acuteness guessed the part he had acted towards her sister—and pointed out that the only way of freeing Adelaide from the fascination he still possessed over her, was to prevent the chances of their meeting.

She had to argue long and patiently, and for Elinor the last trial was the hardest. Her mother maintained that James had loved Adelaide through all, and had only been attracted from her by the fascination of Elinor's presence.

It was very hard to hear this, especially as facts seemed to prove its truth; but when her mother added that James and Adelaide might still be happy, she resolved that her sister should not be linked to one so unworthy. She was unwilling to appeal to Adelaide herself; she knew, by instinct, that so meek and confiding a nature would be very slow to believe the faithlessness of the man she loved; and Elinor craved now so ardently for affection, that she shrank from an explanation which might create a lasting barrier between herself and her sister.

But to her surprise she found an ally in her father. When his wife mentioned Elinor's project to him, with much dread and deprecation, for she anticipated an immediate refusal, he declared that it was what he had been planning for years, just the thing to suit him; that he was sick and tired of working to support so expensive and helpless a family, that they should get the children more cheaply taught abroad, and that if Elinor chose to contribute towards the common fund, he could see every prospect of comfort in her proposal.

And when he found how generously his daughter was disposed to act, he gladly agreed to her one stipulation, that they, at any rate—the female part of the family—should leave England at once: she longed for change, for refuge from thoughts of the past; above all, to be separated from the neighbourhood of her false lover.

Had she known all, she could not have devised a nobler return for her uncle's conduct towards her. His separation from English ties and associations silenced Roland Markham most

effectually ; and although at first strange rumours of all kinds arose respecting Mr. Dryden's adopted son, still, by degrees, they died away, when no one could bring forward any certain foundation for them.

EPILOGUE.

It is evening—but the air is still full of light, aye and of movement, and that soft languorous murmur made by the quiet humming of gnats' wings, tired by the fierce vehemence of their noonday sport. The air stirs gently as the moths flit past. The leaves on the trees are stilly waving, a lullaby to the wearied day as it reclines on the edge of Earth. Soft cooing notes come through the wood, blending with the quiet murmur rather than as distinct sounds. All is hushed, subdued to mellowness—all but the rich orange and blood-red light that, pannelled by the tree stems, streams across the river. Its brilliance almost effaces the fair

landscape, which for the moment it turns to broad masses of gold relieved by deep purple shadows, and completely dazzles the eyes of a group who are watching its glories, half-way up the hanging wood.

Mr. Dryden and Cecil, and two children are resting under an ash tree. She looks scarcely any older, and certainly not a whit less bright and lovely, as she shades her eyes with her hand and gazes across the river. For they have strolled some way beyond the bridge, and Flairs comes no longer between them and the glowing sunset.

And although Mr. Dryden's hair is greyer, there is no other sign of age to mark that some years have passed over him. The life-long cross he bears, in his powerlessness to claim before the world the son he now almost idolizes, has softened and subdued his proud bearing ; but there is a brightness in his eyes, an alertness in his movements, as he defends himself against the joint attacks of his two grandsons, that may well weigh against a few white hairs.

With peals of laughter, in which their mother joins as she turns round from gazing,—the children pelt him with burrs, flowers, and all the light missiles their baby hands can grasp, their rosy faces glowing, and their bright hair shining in ruffled glory round their heads.

But there is a crackling sound among the trees above them, and a well-known shout calls them away to fresh prey. Their uncle Erasmus is a far more unwilling victim than their grandfather.

He is helpless as a cockchafer in the power of children, and when one of his tormentors dives into his pocket, and rushes off with the spoil, he grows desperate, although he makes no effort at pursuit.

“ Bless my soul !—here, Maurice—Cecil—one of you come to this child. Bless my soul ! he—why he’s got my chloroform ! and, well—well—well—he’s given the box of pins to the little one, and he’ll swallow ’em ! ”

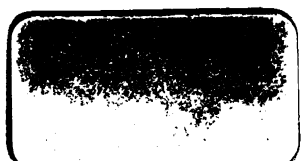
But Mr. Dryden is the only person who has any ears for his complaint, and the delinquents are soon captured.

Maurice and his wife wander on beside the sparkling river. She clasps both hands round his arm as they stand a moment still.

"I used to think," she said, "that happiness must be full of great sorrow as well as intense joy; that true bliss could not continue where life was unchequered by shadows; but now I see it may be like our river, bright for ever, and yet for ever varied by the trifling obstacles that stem its course, only to urge it on more joyously still."

Maurice smiled, and bent down and kissed her for an answer.

THE END.



100